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H A G A R.

VOL. III.

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E. T. Stephenson

H A G A R.

BY

THE AUTHOR OF

“ST. OLAVE’S,” “JANITA’S CROSS,”

“META’S FAITH,”

&c., &c.

“She departed, and wandered in the wilderness.”

“All journeys end in welcomes to the weary—
And heaven, the heart’s true home, is won at last.”

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. III.

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CHAPTER I.

AMOS DURBEN had arrayed himself with unusual care before setting off from his Cardington hotel to make that eventful call upon the Guildensterns. So that when he turned out into the public road he presented quite an imposing appearance—an appearance so entirely unlike that of the Amos Durben of ten years ago, that Mr. Guildenstern and Lancelot, passing him on the turnpike half-way between Morristhorpe and Cardington, thought he was a stranger, come most likely to look over the Darque property. For Morristhorpe Grange had been in the mar-

ket now more than a twelvemonth, and though no one came to any terms about the purchase of it, still a chance speculator in landed property did occasionally drive over from Cardington, and walk round the place, and calculate how much would be required to put it into repair.

Not that Amos Durben could be said to look like a gentleman in the true sense of the word, even after all his care and pains. Prosperity had put a ring of the yellowest Australian gold on his finger, and a set of diamond studs on his shirt-front, and a good suit of black upon his stooping figure, and a hat of the latest fashion and the choicest material on the small head which had such a trick of carrying itself on one side. And it had put into his face the importance, and into his awkward shambling gait a little of the pomposity, of the successful merchant who is conscious of a com-

fortable balance at his bankers; but it had not given him the upright carriage of the man who dares look all the world in the face, nor that lofty, fearless independence with which even the humblest day labourer may walk God's earth, so long as he has never done a mean action upon it, nor sought its shelter for evil deed of his. So far as a gentleman can be made by jewelry and tailor-craft, Amos Durben was a gentleman. So far as gentlemanhood is a thing apart from broadcloth suits and diamond studs, Amos Durben was destitute of it.

Still his general turn-out was very creditable as he strolled leisurely, glove and ebony stick in hand, on that pleasant first of October, down the village street, along which a few years ago he used to shuffle to Cardington market, with twenty or thirty couple of wild fowl slung about his person. Even people much wider awake than Mr.

Guildenstern, who was absorbed in the thought of those unfortunate Penorfa mines, or Lancelot, whose meditations were all for Opal, might have been justified in mistaking him for a gentleman who had come down to look at the Darque property with a view to investing in it. Which indeed he had in a certain sense, though it was not the tumble-down old Grange and the swampy inheritance around it which Amos Durben thought of appropriating, as he entered Morristhorpe village on that pleasant first of October.

Perhaps the plans which were forming themselves in his mind might serve to give a little additional briskness to his deportment. A man ought to look his best when he is going on a courting expedition, especially when the lady whom he seeks to win is both youthful and beautiful, and not by any means able to dispense with such money considerations as he is prepared to present to her. To

do him justice, Opal had made a decided impression upon him by her grace and beauty and her noble bearing, and the delicate refinement of her look and ways, so different to the loud style patronised by the mushroom aristocracy of Melbourne. And the thought of carrying these charms back in triumph to his adopted country, and there parading them before the envious gaze of the colonial belles, had certainly an air of romance about it, which could not fail to put a little brightness into his pale face, and a touch of elasticity into his step.

Though certainly Opal's recognition of him, as he pushed himself up against her in the menagerie, had not been of the pleasantest, most hopeful kind. There was anything but delight in the glance before which his own had quailed—anything but a favourable augury for his future success in the gesture of repulsion with which she had flung her-

self away from him, and placed the broad, burly figure of old Mr. Lester as a screen between them. If Amos Durben had been a man easily turned from his purpose, that look, that gesture would have turned him.

But then, doubtless, she thought she was stepping aside from the touch of a poor man—a man who could only herd with low and common people—a man who was earning his living as he earned it ten years ago, by an occupation which kept him in the lowest ranks of society. It might make all the difference when she found that he was a poor man no longer—that he could buy Morristhorpe parish over and over with those almost uncounted thousands which his own skill and cleverness had won for him. Many a time before now beauty had given itself in exchange for wealth, nor thought the bargain unequal. And why should not this penniless girl, rich in nothing but her

pride and independence, bestow them both upon some one who could give her the wherewithal to sustain them? What better could she do for herself than share that splendid house of his on the Yarra river, and dress in satin and velvet, and queen it amongst the Melbourne upstarts, and drive to town every day of her life in a cushioned carriage, with liveried servants behind and before her, and Amos Durben, not handsome, indeed, but so wealthy and respectable, at her side? Better that, surely, than the straitened means and the uncertain home which was all that Mr. Guildenstern could give her.

And then, if the gilded bait of riches would not tempt, the threat of poverty and disgrace might drive her to yield. For he had but to unfold that scrap of paper in his pocket, on which was written a copy of her baptismal register, taken from the office

in Melbourne, or show that other document containing Lois Fletcher's story, as he had it from her own lips, clinching both these proofs by the prayer-book and purse, which he had taken care to bring with him; and then, where would proud Miss Opal be?

At his mercy—Amos Durben's—powerless in the hands of the man upon whom, only a few hours before, she had cast such a scornful glance! He had only to speak the word, and no roof of Mr. Guildenstern's, he well knew, would be a shelter for her any more; no kindness of his would be given to the daughter of the man who had so cruelly wronged him, the man whose very name was a by-word and reproach in the place. It would be wiser—very much wiser—for the haughty young foundling to take his riches, and along with them himself, and the protection he could give, than play off her scornful airs again, and find herself cast

forth a pauper upon the streets, with no Hagar Winter to care for her now, and not so much as a roof to shelter that proud head of hers.

Amos Durben strolled round the village, enjoying the admiration of the rustics, who gazed with reverent awe upon his diamond studs and Australian gold ring, until the shadows of evening began to fall. No one recognised him except Gilby, who had come to the Mere farm to help in the cleaning. She was going to hurry across the road to him, and invite him in to hear all the story of his adventures, but Amos, who did not wish to demean himself under present circumstances by being seen talking with people of that sort, gave her a patronising nod, and walked on. He had learned as much as she could tell him, and he did not want to have anything more to do with her. Gilby satisfied herself, however, by going in

to old Mrs. Dobbinson, and telling her all about it, and then doing the same kind office for Joe Bletchley, so that before nightfall the news of Amos Durben's return was all over the village.

Towards evening he presented himself at the old house among the chestnut-trees. Mr. Guildenstern was not at home, the servant replied, in answer to the inquiries of the strange gentleman; but a doctor from Cardington, who was staying on the other side of the green, would attend to anything that was required. Young Mr. Lancelot, too, had gone out for the evening, and so had Miss Armitage; and Miss Guildenstern had not returned from Cardington. There was no one in the house just then but Miss Opal. Should she tell Miss Opal that the gentleman would speak to her?

“Yes. Give Miss Opal my card, and say that I wish for a little conversation with

her," replied Amos, assuming as much dignity as he could, and following the servant into Mr. Guildenstern's plainly-furnished little drawing-room, where Opal was sitting alone.

CHAPTER II.

WITH a look of exceeding coldness, Opal gathered up her work, and as Amos Durben entered the room, was about to leave it, supposing him to have come on some matter of business to Mr. Guildenstern.

She seemed to him, now that he saw her in the simple elegance of her own home, more beautiful than ever; this noble daughter of an ignoble father, Hagar Winter's foster-child, whom one word of his could drive forth into the rude blasts of poverty and destitution. The distance and pride of her manner had awed him a little when he entered the room, but that thought restored his confidence. Amos Durben had no true independence. He could only fortify himself

against the cringing cowardice which was natural to him, by remembering the hold circumstances gave him over a girl whose only protection was the ignorance of her friends. It was no time for Miss Opal to queen it over him now. He knew she was absolutely in his power; yet her maiden pride and her maiden beauty, acting upon a nature that was both mean and earthly, cowed him so that the smooth glib words which he had prepared for their meeting quite deserted him. He had to remind himself that he held her fortunes in his own hands, before he could recover himself sufficiently to commence a conversation.

“Excuse me, Miss Opal,” he said, with a deferential bow, as Opal was about to leave the room, “I wanted to see yourself, as I told the servant. I suppose you know who I am.”

“Yes,” said Opal, looking him full in the

face with a calm lofty look which might have floored him again, but for that sense of power over her. "You are Amos Durben, the man that used to keep the decoy some years ago."

"You have a good memory, Miss. I did used to keep it, and it kept me, too, but I've had a better stroke of fortune since then, or I don't know that I should have been here to trouble you to-day. Me and my partner now, we are one of the most extensive importing firms in Melbourne, Messers Blenkin and Durben, as the name stands, and our agents and men of business in this country can witness to it, if my word shouldn't be sufficient. And I thought I should like to see the old place again, especially as things had looked up with me a bit since I left it. I think they've looked up a bit with you, too, Miss. You seem to be pretty comfortably settled here."

Something in the man's manner irritated Opal exceedingly. There was a mixture of fawning and presumption in it which she could scarcely endure. But respect to Mr. Guildenstern held her back from being positively rude to anyone who had been admitted under his roof. With a great effort to keep her disgust under control, she replied,

"I am quite comfortable, thank you. And I am glad to hear that your life so far has been successful."

"Yes, Miss," said Amos, shifting uneasily about on his chair. "I went out, as I may say, with my staff in my hand, for I'd nothing to depend upon, let alone the bit of money which was due to me from Squire Lester, and now I am spread into bands, the firm being as extensive as any you'll find in the colonies. It's a wonderful place, Miss, is Australia, for getting a man on, and you, see I just happened in the right nick of

time. It's everything, Miss, is happening in the right nick of time, and being, as one may say, awake to it, which I always was from the very beginning. I suppose you've been settled here pretty comfortable since my poor sister Hagar was took?"

"Your business, if you please, Mr. Durben," said Opal, coldly. "You said you wished to speak to me."

"No offence, Miss, only, having known you a good bit since, I naturally felt an interest to hear you was safe taken care of when my poor sister Hagar met her end. It was a sad thing, was that, about my poor sister Hagar, but it turned out better for you than what one might have expected. I daresay he's a good man, is Mr. Guildenstern, to anybody as he takes a mind to, and would have been a deal more looked up to in this village than what he is, if it hadn't been for them unfortunate mines as

Captain Darque set a-going. You know, Miss, it was Captain Darque as ruined him."

Amos Durben wanted to come to the point of his story, but not finding words to do it, he began to wriggle and curl himself about like a caterpillar that has been borne by some unexpected gust of wind to an unfamiliar leaf, and finds itself not at home in the situation. Except when he was amongst business-people, with whom he could talk about stock, share-broking, bill-discounting, exports, and so forth, Amos Durben always felt ill at ease, and his uneasiness manifested itself in such restless fidgetting and contortions, that one felt inclined to pick him up, like the stray caterpillar, and drop him down again into the fat sappiness of his native cabbages.

Opal made no reply to his remarks about Mr. Guildenstern. She did not care even to speak the name of her foster-father to a

man whose very presence was intolerable to her. The slight feeling of courtesy which had made her endure him for a little while was fast yielding to uncontrollable disgust. It would have been better for Opal sometimes could she have ruled the outward expression of her dislikes and aversions, but that she could not do. Her love she could hide away so successfully, that those who would have prized it most never knew it was there; but her contempt never failed to tell itself in the cold glance and the gesture of irrepressible scorn with which she always turned from those who had once deceived her.

Amos Durben remembered his power over her, though, and that gave him courage to go on again, still with stealthy look and half-suppressed voice, and a creeping uncomfortableness manifesting itself in every movement.

“There’s been a good many queer things happened to me since I went out to the colonies, Miss. As soon as I was fairly on my feet, I began to do what every sensible man does, when things lies convenient for it—I looked out for a wife to settle with, and I wasn’t long before I found one fitted me like a glove. Lois Fletcher was her name—at least, she was Mrs. Grapeson when I married her, being a widow, but her name before was Lois Fletcher. You perhaps mayn’t happen to have heard of anyone named Lois Fletcher, Miss?”

And Amos, who was getting on the track of his prey now, shrugged up his right shoulder cautiously, and drew in his breath, and glanced furtively round, as he was wont to do when a splendid Norwegian wild fowl was sailing, in all its purple-breasted glory, right into the very entrance of one of his decoy pipes.

"You don't happen to have heard of one Lois Fletcher, Miss?"

"I have not," said Opal. "The name is quite new to me."

"Yes—I thought as much. My sister Hagar was never one that said more than she'd a mind to, and well for yourself, Miss, that she were in that turn. There's a vast of mischief done in this world by people saying more than they've any need to. It's what I don't do myself."

Opal thought he was rather wide of the mark there, and if he would only have paused for a moment, she would have excused herself on the plea of another engagement from the farther infliction of his company. But he seemed to have got fairly afloat now, and went steadily on, eyeing her, meanwhile, with that stealthy, suspicious glance, which, she knew not why, was beginning to exert a sort of magnetic influence over her.

“Yes. Well, as I was saying, I married Lois Fletcher, and a good wife she was to me as long as it pleased Providence to spare her, which it wasn’t long that it did, for she died under two years after we were married. However, there’s as good fish in the sea as ever come out of it, she used to say to me; and things have looked up wonderful with me since I became a widower, and I could do a great deal better for a lady now than what I could do when Lois and me were married, our firm being, as I said, one of the most extensive in the colony, and turning over splendid profits. You maybe won’t believe me, Miss, but my share of the profits last year was over six thousand pounds, and the concern almost doubling itself as it goes along; but when once you’re set a-going in Melbourne, Miss, there’s no end to it. Though I never forgot the old country, and maybe what drew me first to Lois

Fletcher was her having been to Morristhorpe and knowing the place as she did; for it stands to reason, Miss, when you've been off a good while, you like to meet with somebody who knows where you come from and that sort."

"Of course," said Opal coldly, seeing that Amos Durben expected her to say something. And she wondered how long it would be before Miss Armitage came in from old Mr. Russell's. Mr. Guildenstern was away in London, Lancelot and Eulie at Cardington until next morning. Never in her life before had Opal looked forward to Miss Armitage's return with anything like expectation, but now it was her only probable chance of relief from the hateful presence of this man, who yet seemed to hold her spell-bound by that cold, slimy glance of his.

"Yes, she'd been to Morristhorpe Grange, had Lois, and this was how it came about.

It was a lady she lived with in Melbourne—she'd come out there with her husband, and he none of the best, as a great many aren't that go there when their own country isn't safe for them any longer; and when the poor body was dying, and him away nobody knew where, nor cared either for that matter, she made Lois give her a solemn promise that she would bring her baby over to England, and see it safely put with some one she knew there, so that it might be well cared for when she was dead and done for, its father not being a man to do it any good."

"And that was about eighteen years ago, Miss. You'll mind that," continued Amos, shuffling himself a little nearer to Opal as he spoke—"about eighteen years ago. And she was bidden, was Lois Fletcher, to come to a place called Morrishorpe Grange, and leave the child with a woman named Hagar

Winter, who was to take care of it as if it had been her own. Eighteen years ago, you mind, Miss. And she staid there, did the child, for my sister Hagar was always a woman who could be trusted to keep her word. And she did for it as well as she could until something happened to her."

"I understand," said Opal quietly.

Yet Amos Durben's words awoke no terror and but little anxiety in her mind. The names of father and mother were names to her and nothing more. She had had a misty notion once when she was a very little girl that Amos Durben was her father, because Hagar Winter was her mother; and it had been a wonderful relief to her when Hagar told her that she had not a father—she had lost him, and she had lost her mother too, and therefore she was what people call an orphan. And since she came to Mr. Guildenstern's no questions had been asked.

Indeed, when she had told her own simple story to Eulie, as she did tell it before the two children had known each other very long, that she had lost her father and mother, and that Mother Hagar had taken care of her ever since she could remember, there was nothing more left to tell; for Hagar Winter was in the asylum then, and Amos Durben had already told Mr. Guildenstern all he knew. And so it was with no show of excitement, no tremor in voice or manner that she replied now,

“I understand you. You are speaking to me of myself.”

“Yes, Miss.” And Amos began to fumble in his pocket for his credentials. “I thought it was nought but right you should know; for if you’re not the right party to be informed, I don’t know who is. And when I was coming over to England, I thought I might as well bring the bits of things that

the lady left with Lois. And to make it surer, too, Miss, afore Lois died I had it properly drawn up, what she told me, with her name signed to it, and the lawyer's name that wrote it; and then the lawyer and me we went and found the baptismal register, which of course there was no certainty until we had it."

Amos took out the two papers from his pocket-book, and laid them on the table, keeping his hand upon them, however, for the present.

"And then," he continued, fumbling in his other pocket, "there was one or two little things which the poor lady gave to Lois, and told her she might keep them for herself, besides what else she gave her for her trouble; and Lois being gone, and me not wanting to keep anybody back from their own, I brought them along, thinking you was the most proper person to take care of them."

By this time Amos had brought out a prayer-book, in faded morocco binding, with silver clasps, and what had been a costly purse of filigree work, with a name engraven upon a shield at the back of it.

“There, Miss,” he said, passing the articles to her, one by one, yet keeping a careful eye, both upon them and her, lest she should attempt to seize and destroy them.

“That’s the register, an exact copy, as the lawyer, Mr. Cramp, of Louisa Street, Melbourne, went with me to get it. And that’s the document as he drew up from what my wife said, and put her name to it as you see here properly witnessed.”

“And this, Miss,” he continued, opening the prayer-book, and laying it before her, “will help you on a bit farther, as you haven’t read them other two yet. It’s your own mother’s prayer-book, and here’s her name in it. Clara Darque. Morristhorpe

Grange. July 18——; that's the summer, Miss, before Captain Darque went away promiscuous, no one hearing any more tell about him. And it was your own mother's house, Miss, that you was brought to by my wife, Lois Fletcher, she being an unmarried party at that time; and it was my sister, Hagar Winter, who lived maid with Mrs. Darque before she was married, and came with her to Morrithorpe Grange, as took care of you. And the prayer-book, anyone in Morrithorpe parish might swear to, amongst the respectable people at that end, for she was a lady that always went to church, was Mrs. Darque, and used it every Sunday of her life before she left the place."

"And there's your father's arms inside, Miss," Amos Durben continued, drawing nearer and nearer to Opal, who was pale enough, and trembling now. "Your own father's arms, Miss, Captain Darque's, as I

thought it was a pity you shouldn't have them to look at, for it stands to reason a person should like to know who their father was, and who they are, and what they come from; though perhaps it isn't a deal that anyone with the Darque name has to be proud of it, but it's a name that people needn't keep unless they like."

Amos sat down again, and gloated over the struggles of his victim. His proud, shy, fluttering wild bird was close to the netting now. He had little to do but wring its neck, and make what he could of it.

CHAPTER III.

OPAL sat there for a long time, mute, motionless, transfixed under Amos Durben's gloating, revengeful gaze, quivering with pain in every nerve, yet making no sign either by word or look of the horror which was overwhelming her. How long she sat there she never knew, for such agony as she lived through then does not count time by hours. One thought only stood clearly up like a sharp, black, rugged rock amidst the waves of troubled thought which Amos Durben's words had caused to rush in upon her. She was the child of the man through whose guilt Lancelot's hopes had been so maimed and marred. Her pulses throbbed

with the life which he had given her—he, who had given Lancelot only cause to hate and execrate him. But for his villany, a life, which she loved so much better than her own, might have been bright and prosperous. Lancelot might have held up his head with ancestral pride in his father's village, kept up his father's name in the place where it had been spoken for many a generation with honour and respect, instead of having to go out amongst strangers, and spend years—spend, perhaps, the best part of his life-time—in struggling with poverty and hardship, and privation, which nowhere press so bitterly as on those who must needs bear them beneath the guise of smiling contentment.

No thought of possible mischief, which might result to herself, had room as yet to stir in her heart. She only thought of the wrong which had been done to others by

him who had, as it were, transferred his guilt to herself, and of whose ill-doings she had now to bear the heavy burden. Those whom most she loved had been wronged by him whose hateful name she bore. Those who had been giving to her out of their poverty, straitening themselves that she might be warmed and comforted, sharing with her the simple refinements which were so often hardly earned, had been doing it all for the child of their direst enemy. They had been cherishing the brood of the viper who had destroyed their own nest. They had given love where they had received the coldest cruelty, and pity where their own having had been only deceit and wrong.

Opal sat there by the table, the papers which told of her shame, and disgrace, and humiliation gleaming whitely beneath her wide-open, sightless eyes, her hands vainly endeavouring to steady themselves, as they

clutched the faded little prayer-book, whose cover and clasps bore the name she had been taught to speak with scorn and contempt. Amos Durben began to pace up and down the room, glancing furtively at her as he passed and repassed, so close to her, that she could almost feel his breath upon her face. But she took no notice of him. The evil influence of his presence now was quenched by the more evil tidings he had brought.

“Amos Durben,” she said at last, and there was the slow, dull ring of despair in her voice—“Amos Durben, you have brought me heavy news.”

“That’s as it may be, Miss Darque,” he replied, laying a slight emphasis on the last word, and deliberately watching the quiver which passed over her face as he said it—“that’s as it may be. There’s never a way into a trouble, but there’s a way out of it.”

“What have I done to you, Amos Durben?” she asked, her proud head bent down with shame. “What have I done to you, that you should do this to me? I never injured you, that you should injure me so cruelly.”

And then the hot tears began to rain down over her cheeks, and Opal—scornful, haughty Opal—wept like a child in the presence of the man she despised.

Amos Durben said nothing, but he felt his victory. He could make her suffer now. The wild, tameless thing could not spring away from him any more. He felt it throbbing, trembling, bleeding in his clutches. Not until all the pride was crushed out of it, would he release his hold. He kept walking up and down, feeding his greedy eyes upon her pain.

At last, with a desperate effort, Opal rose to her feet. One way of release was before

her—only one. If this man, who held her secret, would keep it. She would beseech him, Amos Durben, whom she loathed and scorned, to be pitiful—to have mercy upon her. It were better to humble herself to him than face the terrible reality of the position into which the knowledge which he possessed would fling her.

“Amos Durben,” she said, “I never asked you to do me a kindness yet.”

“No, Miss, not as I remember.”

And Amos shrugged his shoulder and crept a little closer to her, darting hungry passionate glances upon his beautiful prey. For she did look very beautiful in the misery which he had brought upon her, and he scarcely knew which to enjoy most—the sweet consciousness of revenge for all the scorn she had spent upon him, or the sweeter hope of grasping her beauty for himself when he had deeply enough wounded her pride.

“Then, Amos Durben, I do it now. If you have any pity for me, if you have any love for the memory of your sister Hagar, who was so good to me, who loved me as if I had been her own, let this be kept silent between us. Do not, if you have a man’s heart within you, expose me to the scoffs and taunts of the whole village, to the scorn of the friend who has given me a home so long. Mr. Durben, you will not be so cruel to me, you will not use the power which these papers give you over me!”

He crouched up to her, and took in his cold clammy hand that which was stretched out to him in terror-stricken appeal.

“Miss Darque, it is a very unpleasant business, and if it hadn’t been as the interests of truth demanded that you should be let to know about it, so as you should not be in such a position where it was not known whose you were, I’m not the party to have

stirred up disagreeableness. And I beg you to believe as I have not mentioned it at the present time from no malicious motives, but only out of wanting everybody to have their own; and respecting you as I do, Miss, and having my present feelings towards you——”

And Amos Durben stooped down until his thin colourless lips touched Opal's hand. With the most horrible sense of shame and humiliation which had ever come to her, she snatched it away from him. But she dare not be scornful now. This man held her destiny in his power.

“No offence, Miss.” And Amos Durben, revengeful, malicious, steeped to the lips in earthliness and greed, crouched still lower before Opal, who even in her deepest misery had done no wrong. “There's one way, Miss Darque, as everything might be made plain and agreeable, and not so much as a

word mentioned of anything that was unpleasant; for though I'm not a high educated man, I'm respectable, and always was, and nobody has anything to bring up against me for being a man that pays my way, and a partner now in one of the most extensive concerns in Melbourne, and the highest of references as I can give you to all our business connections in England."

Opal had turned towards him again with a bewildered, questioning look. Amos Durben rich, respectable, well thought of? Surely then he could not be so cruel, having all he needed, as to shatter her poor little harmless life into ruin and desolation. He could do himself no harm by silence—he could do her such a priceless good.

"Yes, Miss Darque," he continued, making another effort to reach the hand which she held away from him. "My house at the Yarra settlement only wants one thing which

I can put into it, and that is a wife. Behold your admirer, Miss Opal. My heart is yours, it is, upon my word, though you're not what I might have looked for, owing to present circumstances, and me being worth what I am. But I'll settle three hundred a year upon you to begin with, and if you'll go out with me to Melbourne as Mrs. Durben, no one shall ever know as I had the statements to make which I'm prepared to come forward with at the present moment, expecting to lay them before your friends, as I thought it my duty to do. And I don't see but what you'll do well for yourself. I've given you a chance as there's a many both here and on the other side wouldn't want twice asking to take, and no unpleasant circumstances neither to make a difference."

"I marry Amos Durben!" said Opal, in a kind of stupor. Indeed, the events of the past hour seemed like a dream in their

strangeness and suddenness. "Did you ask me to marry you, Mr. Durben?"

"Yes, I did, Miss—and why not? Amos Durben can give you wealth—Amos Durben can give you a better home than this——"

And he looked round, with the eye of an appraiser, on the scanty furnishing of the room, different enough to the brocaded upholstery of his drawing-room at the Yarra settlement.

"Amos Durben can give you carriages and jewels and servants, and as much money as you want to spend, and he can hold his tongue about things which might make a difference to you if they was let to get abroad, and he can give you a respectable place to put your head into, when, maybe, Mr. Guildenstern won't feel it laid upon him to do it any longer; and what more would you have?"

Opal lifted up her pale face, through which

the red flame glow was beginning to burn and quiver again, and there was never another tone of pleading or beseeching in her voice as she said to him,

“Amos Durben can never give me what I prize more than any of these things—the right to call myself an honest^s man’s wife.”

“That’s as it may be,” said Amos. “One man’s as good as another, when he’s got plenty of money. And perhaps it may be as well to remember, Miss Darque, that if you don’t take my terms, you’ll have to take something else, which won’t be as pleasant. You’re in my power now, you know.”

“I am, Mr. Durben, but innocently so; and I think scorn of myself now that I could ever have stooped so low as to ask from you as a favour what I could not claim as a right. Do your worst; it cannot be so bad as this best which you have offered to me.

And know, if I did not speak plainly enough before, that I will starve, labour, suffer—yes, die before any gold of yours shall buy me for your wife!”

Amos wriggled back again to his former position by the table, and began to rub his hands. Excitement, passion most likely. How glorious it made her look! But she would come to her senses by-and-by.

“Miss Darque,” he said, “I won’t take an unfair advantage of what you’ve said. When you’ve known what it is to get your own bread, you’ll be sorry you didn’t take a good offer while you had the chance. You’ll most likely think better of it to-morrow, and I won’t keep you to your word. I’ll call again in the morning, when the rest of the family will be at home. It’s important that the rest of the family should be acquainted, you know, Miss Darque.”

And again Amos paused to see if the

look of pain would tighten upon Opal's face. But it was hard, immoveable, rock-like in its defiance of him and his tyranny.

"Of course, I should think it my duty to acquaint them, as I'm a person that has a character for speaking the truth. Only, if you came into what I've said, I wouldn't let a word pass my lips, and I'd do the thing handsome, too—three hundred a year, as I said before, to start with."

"Amos Durben," and Opal's eyes flashed upon him with a glance which made him cower, even though he tried to parry it by remembering that she was in his hands, "I am not houseless yet. How dare you insult me in this way under Mr. Guildenstern's roof?"

"I did not mean to insult you," said Amos, shuffling back a few paces. "I only said what I would be agreeable to do in case you should think different when you'd had time to turn it over. And whatever

Mr. Guildenstern lost by your father, I'll make it even again, so as it mayn't be cast up against you, when you're my wife, as other people had lost by their connection with your family. A few thousands doesn't make much difference to me when it's respectability that has to be considered, and I should object having it said that I'd taken my wife out from them as had lost by her. Whether it's much, or whether it's little, I'll make it all right with the old gentleman, and the young 'un, too, if folks says his prospects has been a bit damaged by the want of money, which is a pity, as I always say, when a man can't make a fair start for himself."

"Mr. Durben, if you please we will not discuss Mr. Guildenstern's family matters here. I am quite aware that my father acted very wrongly. I do not need any further explanations from you."

“Just as you please, Miss. Only I am going to observe that I’m on my way to London at the present, to see after my passage home in the vessel that starts in a few days; but if you can make it agreeable to go with me, I shan’t mind waiting for a few weeks, though it isn’t to my interest to do so, and the business requiring me in the colonies. And whatever money can do, Miss Darque, you being willing to my terms, I’ll do, and not a word said about anything unpleasant, which is perhaps as much as any one has a right to expect, and you not much to speak of at present, and Mr. Guildenstern not being likely, if everything was known, to want you about the place much longer, which I shall take care isn’t mentioned if your mind goes that way.”

“Mr. Durben, I will spare you the trouble of further explaining the obligations under which you have laid me. You have indeed

thrust me very low by the information which you have taken such pains to place before me; but I would rather remain where you have thrust me than fall still lower by purchasing your silence on the terms which you have offered. You have taken from me very much, but you cannot take from me my self-respect; and whilst I hold that, even with nothing else besides, I am richer than you, Amos Durben, with all your gold."

What answer the millionaire might have made to such an adjustment of his position is uncertain, for at that moment Miss Armitage, all smiles and animation, came bustling into the room.

CHAPTER IV.

SHE had just returned from a visit to old Mrs. Russell, who generally had a fine budget of gossip to turn out. And the budget this time had been of unusual interest, for Mrs. Russell had been on a shopping expedition to Cardington, and the drapery establishment where she had spent most of her morning was next door to the Red Lion Hotel, the chief hotel in Cardington, where Amos Durben had taken up his quarters. Of course the young man at the shop knew all about the recent arrival; told her how Mr. Durben was driving about the town in a private brougham, ordering the best of everything, and spending his money like a

prince. Amos Durben, who used to keep Mr. Lester's decoy little more than ten years ago, and walk into Cardington market with his strings of teal and widgeon, getting a chance lift sometimes in a farmer's waggon, and thinking himself lucky indeed if one of the Squire's men, going over for the letters, gave him a seat at the back of the dog-cart amongst the hampers and parcels. Now he seemed as if he was ready to buy up the whole town. He had been ordering fabulous quantities of goods from the leading establishments, paying down ready money for them, and choosing carriages to take out with him; and as for his behaviour at the hotel, the waiters doffed their caps to him as if he had been a prince, so lavishly did he scatter his commands for the best of everything, and plenty of it, too.

Moreover, Miss Armitage had seen Gilby, Mrs. Lester's old servant, and Gilby had con-

firmed Mrs. Russell's statement, having seen Mr. Durben herself, and being able to bear witness to the magnificence of his appearance. It was a fine thing, Gilby said, to go to Melbourne if that was the way people came back after ten years' work. Why, if people said true he could buy the Mere farm over and over, without even feeling any poorer for it. Though, as Gilby added, that needn't make a man pass by those who used to be his equals as though they didn't belong to him any more. Gilby's admiration had been strongly dashed with bitterness since Mr. Durben gave her the cold shoulder on Morris-thorpe village green a few hours before.

But Miss Armitage thought a man with so many thousands of pounds was perfectly justified in choosing his own society. Miss Armitage worshipped prosperity, and she bestowed the unmingled lustre of her smiles on anyone who was fortunate enough to

achieve it. So it was no wonder that she entered the room at Chesnut Cottage all interest and animation, when, just before, as she went into the kitchen to give an order, the servant had told her that Mr. Durben was waiting, and had been waiting for more than an hour, to see either the master or the mistress.

“So exceedingly glad to see you, Mr. Durben,” she said, stretching out her hand to take that which ten years ago she would have flung from her with such disdain—“exceedingly glad to see you, and I am sure it must be a great pleasure to you to come back to Morristhorpe after such a successful absence from it. I assure you, Mr. Durben, you have created quite a sensation in Cardington. We hear of your doings on all sides. Do accept my congratulations. I always rejoice in well-earned success; and sit down and tell us what you have been about

to return such a millionaire, as the people say you are."

Amos began to feel a little more like a man. Miss Armitage put him upon the foundation of his wealth, where he could stand comfortably. That was safer ground than even the power which Miss Darque seemed to treat so lightly. And so he replied, with the mixture of fawning and assurance which Opal had disliked so much when he came in at first,

"Yes, ma'am, I can't say but what I've made a tolerable good thing of it since I went out. You see, I was in the nick of time, and it's everything is being in the nick of time. I don't suppose there's a man in the colony has done better than what I have myself; though I did have a stone in the other pocket, as one may say, when I lost my wife, as I was telling Miss—Miss——"

And Amos seemed uncertain how to go on.

“Pray do not hesitate over my name, Mr. Durben,” said Opal proudly, the tears still flashing in her eyes. But Miss Armitage was too much absorbed in her congratulations to notice either the tears or the pride.

“As I was telling this young lady, ma’am——”

“Miss Opal Guildenstern, Mr. Durben—a young person who was adopted by my brother-in-law some years ago, when circumstances rendered her destitute.”

“Yes, ma’am, I know that. I know the young lady, from living with my sister Hagar, before I went away to the colonies.”

“Oh! dear, yes; I had quite forgotten. You see, Mr. Durben, your present appearance makes us quite oblivious of the past; but I am glad you have the true nobility of not being ashamed to remember it. I think we should always be willing to remember the past, Mr. Durben. And what a very distress-

ing thing that was about your poor sister Hagar Winter! I assure you deep commiseration was felt for her in the parish. So very untimely, you know."

"Yes, ma'am, a very painful thing. It's always painful when parties comes to an end out of the common way. But you see, ma'am, it didn't turn out so much amiss for the young lady, she being comfortably settled as she is with Mr. Guildenstern."

"Yes," said Miss Armitage carelessly, without even glancing at Opal, who was too deeply absorbed now in her new and terrible position even to feel the indignity of being thus talked about in her own presence. "Yes, my brother-in-law was always a kind man; more kind perhaps than prudent sometimes, not having the resources to fall back upon, you know, Mr. Durben, which some people can command. Of course, where there is unbounded wealth, a man can do what he likes

for strangers. And pray may I ask, has Mrs. Durben accompanied you to visit the scenes of your youth?"

"No, ma'am," said Amos Durben, complacently. "As I was telling the young lady, my place in Melbourne only wants one thing that I can put into it, and maybe I shall have the good luck to take Mrs. Durben out with me, if things could be settled convenient for it. I've made up my mind, ma'am, since I came to Morrishorpe, as my place in Melbourne shan't want for a lady to finish it off, no longer than what I can help."

And Amos Durben's cool, calculating glance fastened itself upon Opal, who sat apart from them now, silent, motionless, rigid.

Miss Armitage caught the glance, and interpreted it at once. It was the very thing for Opal. A more brilliant opportunity could

not have fallen in her way. And so speedily settled, too, as the affair must be, if, as Mrs. Russell had informed her, Mr. Durben was returning to Melbourne by the next vessel. Of course he was not exactly the person one could have wished for a family connection if he had been residing in the immediate neighbourhood, where everyone knew about his antecedents; but going to settle on the other side of the world made all the difference, and it would be such a relief to her to have Opal fairly out of the way, now that that last unlucky call upon the Penorfa investment, about which Mr. Guildenstern had just set off to London, made it extremely uncertain whether Lancelot would not be obliged to remain at home a little longer. If the call had to be met immediately, it would just swamp the funds which had been laid aside for the expenses of Lancelot's next year in London; and she knew very well that

her nephew was far too independent to support himself there on borrowed capital. And if he did remain at home another twelve-month, doing what he could for a living by taking pupils in Morrishorpe or Cardington until he was able to start for himself, it would be such a nuisance having Opal on her hands all that time.

For he was not improving his opportunities with Miss Luxmore as she could wish to have seen him improve them, and she quite attributed his want of push in that direction to the influence which Opal exercised over him. They seemed to fascinate each other, even whilst they were quarrelling and making it up again. And though she had no doubt that by judicious management she could prevent the affair from coming to anything serious between them, still it had a disturbing influence upon his relations with Miss Luxmore, and made him

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hang back from a direct understanding with her. But this would settle the whole matter so triumphantly. For once in her life, Providence had done better for Miss Armitage than she could have done for herself.

Therefore her face was positively radiant with good-will, as she replied to Amos Durben's inuendo, though without in the least appearing to comprehend it.

"Indeed, Mr. Durben! I am sure you will not find the slightest difficulty in arranging that matter. Any difficulty which might be met with would certainly not arise from the lady's objections. I imagine you will rather find yourself at a loss to make a selection from the numbers who would be only too proud to have such an honour conferred upon them."

"Well, yes, ma'am."

And Amos Durben's lean fingers wandered instinctively to the diamond studs

which sparkled in his shirt front; he always felt more sure of his position when he had those studs under his fingers, they seemed to be such a stay to his respectability.

“I needn’t go far out of my way to say that I should be able to do pretty handsomely to any lady as might feel at all agreeable to go out with me, and I should take good care she shouldn’t want for anything that gold could buy. But if there’s any likelihood of Mr. Guildenstern being in, ma’am, I’ll step round a bit and look in again to-morrow. I’ve a deal of things I should like to say to him.”

“Of course, of course, Mr. Durben: but do not go away on that account, we shall be exceedingly glad if you will spend the evening with us, and, in fact, make the house your home so long as you remain in the neighbourhood. I am quite sure my brother would second the invitation if he were here.”

Amos Durben glanced again at Opal, who met his look with one bright, clear, defiant. It owned no power of his; it made him totter even on his foundation of gold and bank notes. Its glistening crystalline pureness lighted up the soiled chambers of a soul in which neither man nor woman could safely dwell. He could only revenge himself upon her by telling all he knew. Should he speak out, then? She had dared him to do it once; that fearless look seemed to dare him to do it again.

And yet, perhaps he had better not. He would hold her at arm's length a little longer. He would give her a few hours to repent of her pride. When she came to consider the position in which words of his could place her, she would see the advisability of yielding. And, after all, she would be such a splendid prize to take back and display amongst the rude, coarse upstarts of

the diggings. The triumph of that would be better than the triumph of seeing her driven out from Mr. Guildenstern's house, homeless, destitute, a pauper.

"Much obliged, ma'am," he said, with a low bow to Miss Armitage—"all the same obliged, but I've ordered my dinner and a bottle of champagne at the 'Red Lion,' and I may as well have it as not. I'm staying at a first-rate house, for I've got used to things comfortable now, and I like to keep to it, though the prices are high, but not near like what they are in our country. But I'll step in to-morrow, ma'am, if Mr. Guildenstern is likely to be about, and mention a thing or two as I should like him acquainted with."

And here Amos Durben shuffled up to Opal, and sheltering himself with bended head from the clear gaze of her scorn, whispered—

“You’ve got the ball at your feet, Miss. You can think over things before to-morrow morning. I’m agreeable to wait while then, and if you can’t bring your mind to it, a word or two to her——”

Amos jerked his elbow in the direction of Miss Armitage.

“A word or two to her’ll do it, and then you’ll see. I’ve only got to show them that paper and the book, as I daresay Miss Armitage can remember it.”

“I will save you the trouble,” said Opal. “Miss Armitage”—and the young girl stood up now, calm, self-controlled, so far off in her conscious innocence from the guilt of the man who had her in his power—“Miss Armitage, Amos Durben has come to-day to tell me who and what I am. Some years ago, in Melbourne, he married the woman who brought me, when I was a baby, to Morrishorpe Grange, to be taken care of

by Hagar Winter. That woman told him the circumstances under which she brought me. I am Captain Darque's daughter. His wife, my mother, entrusted me to the care of this woman to bring me to Hagar Winter, who was then living at Morristhorpe Grange. You know all the rest. Here is a copy of my baptismal register, which Amos Durben has been kind enough to bring me. And here is a prayer-book bearing my mother's name and the Darque arms, which was given by my mother to Lois Fletcher, the woman who brought me over to England."

Miss Armitage flung herself upon the sofa, preparatory to a fit of hysterics. Amos Durben, cowed, as untruthful people always are, by the brave, fearless forthspeaking of the truth, shuffled, and wriggled, and shrugged his shoulder, and glanced timidly, first in one direction, then in another.

Opal alone was steady as a rock. She had prepared herself now to face the worst.

“Oh! you designing wretch!” screamed Miss Armitage, almost choking with passion and excitement, “to have come under my poor dear brother’s roof under such false pretences, and eaten the bread out of the poor dear children’s mouths, and been treated in every respect as a daughter! I shall faint—I’m sure I shall. Oh! you *deceitful*—you *ungrateful* creature!—and I told my poor brother-in-law from the very beginning he was doing wrong, though we none of us thought what a viper you would turn out, taking you off the parish, as I may say we did. Oh! you disreputable—you vile—”

“Stay, Miss Armitage,” said Opal, a fierce glow of pride flashing up over all the paleness of her face. “You shall say no word against me. I suffer in my father’s guilt, but I do not share in his disgrace. You may call me what

you like, out of the hate you bear to him, but I am as much a lady as you are yourself; for low as I have fallen through the words of this man, I stand upright still."

"No, I have not finished yet," for Miss Armitage was gathering up her strength for a second explosion. "I have not finished yet," and Opal pointed to Amos Durben, who was crouching and cringing by her side. "This man would keep my secret for a bribe. When he first told me my father's name, I besought him—and I am sorry now that I could so far have forgotten myself—to shield me by his silence from the shame it would bring me. I prayed him to let it be unspoken, save between us two. And he granted me my request if I would sell myself for his gold. If I would live in his fine house on the Yarra, and sit in his carriage, and wear his jewels, and be his wife."

"Yes, *yes!*" screamed Miss Armitage, "and a

splendid offer too, and one that you might be proud and thankful to take ; for it isn't one man in a thousand," continued the exasperated lady, forgetful alike of etiquette, good-breeding, manners, and everything except the fact that Opal was the daughter of the man who had ruined her brother-in-law and his children, "who would have had you, knowing what you are, and palmed for all these years as you have been upon a respectable family. And I assure you, Mr. Durben—"

Here Miss Armitage turned the screams of her eloquence in the direction of the successful merchant—

"I assure you, Mr. Durben, we all owe you a debt of thankfulness for representing the girl to us in her proper light ; and I hope she will feel the honour that you have put upon her, in being willing to forget her disgrace and give her a place to shelter her, which she

doesn't deserve; and so far as we are all concerned, you are very welcome to her!"

Mr. Durben bowed, and turning to Opal, was about to appropriate the hand which had been so generously bestowed upon him.

"Thank you, Miss Armitage," said Opal. "You will allow me to choose my own future. I have given you your answer, Amos Durben."

"Yes, no offence, Miss. Only I thought as you'd stated the particulars yourself, maybe you wasn't ashamed of them."

"I am never ashamed of anything, Amos Durben, but my own wrong-doing."

Amos sneaked away to a position more immediately under the shelter of Miss Armitage's wing.

"And I was going to mention to you, ma'am, what the young lady, Miss—*Miss*——"

"Miss Darque," said Opal.

"Yes, ma'am, what Miss Darque hasn't mentioned yet to my knowledge, that I was quite

agreeable, if she could have accommodated herself to going out with me, to have made all straight what Captain Darque had defrauded Mr. Guildenstern in, so that I mightn't have a wife to hear anything cast up against her, which isn't according to my position, and me looked up to in the colony. And whether it had been more or whether it had been less, I'd have paid up everything, that she should have been respectable before we went out."

Miss Armitage shrieked, positively shrieked, with wrath.

"And you refused Mr. Durben's offer, Opal? You refused to let my dear sister's husband have his rights given back to him! You allow him to remain in poverty and obscurity, that your wretched selfishness may be gratified! Oh! you unworthy creature to refuse——"

"I only refuse, Miss Armitage, to sell myself to Amos Durben for any price."

"Don't speak another word to me. Hold

your tongue this minute," persisted the indignant defender of family rights; "you're not fit to remain in the house another day. But I know what it is. You spurn Mr. Durben's splendid generosity because you want to ensnare my nephew. Don't think that I am ignorant of your arts and devices, you bold, designing girl. I have had my eye upon you ever since the poor dear boy came home, and I saw you had marked him. Oh! you—what name can I find that will express your artfulness? But he knows it. I have cautioned him against allowing himself to be entrapped by you. Don't think, if you refuse Mr. Durben, that I shall allow you to make a prey of my innocent nephew. You——"

"Miss Armitage"—and there was a steel-like keenness in Opal's voice which compelled the angry woman to pause in the torrent of her abuse—"Miss Armitage, you are tell-

ing me what is not true. You know that I have never done one of the things you accuse me of. You are very false, you are very unjust and hard-hearted. As for my palming myself upon you, you knew as much of me until to-day as I knew of myself. Be assured of one thing, however, I shall not trespass upon your kindness much longer."

"No, that you shan't!" screamed Miss Armitage. "I shall take care of that. My poor dear brother shall not be imposed upon any longer by such a mean, oh! such a *mean*, deceitful—such—such——"

But before Miss Armitage finished her sentence, Opal, still holding the prayer-book and register, had gone out of the room, leaving her aunt and Amos Durben to conclude matters between themselves.

CHAPTER V.

IT was night now, neither moon nor stars were out. That first October day which rose so brightly, had ended in clouds and gloom. Gloom without, gloom within; the poor life, ever scant of sunshine even in its fairest moments, quite dark now. Only the day would dawn again after these October clouds, but for her night there seemed no morning.

She went away through the garden into the orchard, where but a few hours before she had lingered half sadly, half happily, watching Lancelot as he turned for a farewell look before obeying the summons of his aunt. Sad for the thought that so much

was unspoken between them ; glad that even a little of the reserve which had vexed them both so long, was at last cleared away. Only a few hours ago, and it seemed like a whole long lifetime. Then she was sheltered, cared for, protected by Mr. Guildenstern, to whom she looked up as her father ; for whom, silent, undemonstrative as he was, she cherished almost a daughter's reverence.

A daughter's reverence. What a mockery the words appeared, now that she knew to whom she belonged ! A daughter's reverence ; she kept saying the words over and over to herself, and then thinking of the man who claimed all that they involved. Captain Darque, the scoff and by-word of the village, a man whose very name called to the lips of those who spoke it only a curl of contempt or anger ; who had left his memory a heritage of shame and reproach

in the place, his home cursed and blackened for the evil deeds he had wrought there. Captain Darque was her father, and what daughterly love she had to give, belonged to him.

Now there was no one in the whole wide world who could give her what she so much needed. She was, indeed, as Amos Durben had told her, a pauper. Nay, she was even worse than a pauper, for shame and disgrace do not of necessity go with pauperism. Even a man who cannot earn his own bread may have come of honest parents, may wear a name without a slur upon it, and own friends who, in his deepest needs, can reach out to him a pity untouched by bitterness. But her name was her curse. Its sound bore a denial of all that she needed. The only friends to whom she could look were those whose lives had been straitened, and whose prospects blighted by her father's

frauds. And if pity of theirs reached her any more, it could only come side by side with reproach. Sadly, sadly as she wandered out there, alone in the dark, with no hand to clasp hers, no voice to speak a word of comfort to her, Opal looked into the dreary future, and finding in it no streak of hope, nor even the faintest promise of a dawn, prayed God that she might die.

Homeless? No, not homeless. There was that splendid home waiting for her in the Yarra settlement. Unprotected? Nay, there was Amos Durben ready to give her the shelter of a name to which moneyed respectability bowed down, and merchants did homage. Friendless? He would be a very close friend to her, stay by her all her life, and make that life as rich as gold could make it. She had but to go back to him—she could see his stooping figure even now, in the drawing-room, close by Miss Armit-

age—and put her hand into his cold, flabby fingers, and say it should stay there always; strike the bargain, prepare to go to Melbourne, the bride of one of its richest men, the envy of all the colonial belles who would fain have won with their money what had been given for her grace. Only a lie or two at the altar, followed by the lifelong lie which she had not been the first by many a one to tell, and all would be right. No more taunting of her then with any wrong that she had done, no more speaking of her name with curses for the ill it had wrought.

For had not Amos Durben said he would make all that right? Had he not promised to refund the money which Mr. Guildenstern and Lancelot, and Eulie, had lost through her father's dishonesty? Whether it be much, or whether it be little, he had said, as he fawned upon her with such soft,

low tones, an hour ago. Would it not be better to let him do it? Her life was dreary enough now; it could not be much more dreary if she had to live it as his wife in that grand house at the Yarra settlement, amongst his carriages and servants, and fine furniture, herself only a piece of furniture, a little more costly, perhaps, than the rest, prized at three hundred a year, at any rate, independent of what he paid for her at first, but still bought with his gold, and belonging to him even as they did.

Had she not better go and have done with it? Go to this sneaking, fawning, cringing decoy-man, and say to him,

“Amos Durben, I will go back with you to Australia, and live in your fine house, and sit at your sumptuous table, and lounge by your side in your cushioned carriage, and be your wife. Only do for me what you said you would do. Pay back to these

people what they have lost by the man whose daughter I am. Give me the right to look them in the face before we part for ever, and feel that what gold can do to pay them has been done."

And afterwards. Yes, afterwards.

But what need she care for the afterwards? She would have done at least one good thing in her life, she would have brightened Lancelot's future, cleared that from the cloud and uncertainty which lay upon it now, given him back the right to work at the work which he had chosen for himself, instead of being tied down to the slow drudgery of a hired tutor. It would be worth something to do that for him, and he need never know the fearful price at which it had been done. He would think that it was all right; that she had managed well for herself in securing rich, respectable, successful Amos Durben for a husband.

And if there had been any truth in Miss Armitage's cruel words, if he did indeed think that she had been "aiming" at him, and setting her traps for him; or if those last kindly words of his had been treasured by her too easily won heart, as precious with a meaning they had never held, why then this would show him that he was mistaken, and she should clear herself both from the imputation of seeking to entrap his favour, or giving, in her woman's weakness, what he to whom she gave it had never sought.

As Opal thought thus with herself, pacing to and fro in the orchard, doubt, despair, love, pride, and defiance all struggling for the mastery in her soul, she came to the old gnarled apple-tree under which was the swing where she and Lancelot and Eulie had had many a pleasant time of it when they were all children together. Thence, guided by the silver chain of memory, her thoughts

strayed to those early happy days when the love of him had been as sunshine to her lonely little heart, and thence to those still earlier days when she used to wander, so uncared for, so unloved—for she did not know then the depth of Hagar Winter's devotion—in the dreary old garden of Morris-thorpe Grange, her father's home, and thence to the quiet, grave, pale-faced woman at whose knee she used to sit and spell her Bible chapter; and thence to one evening, so long ago now that it seemed but a dim, faint stain upon the past, one chill cloudy October night like this, when Amos Durben had gone away with his dogs to the decoy, and Hagar Winter was telling her the story of Jacob and Esau.

There the links of the silver chain stopped, and Opal lingered where they had left her. For, as she sat at her foster-mother's knee in the warm red firelight, listening with childish eagerness to that old, old story of

fraud, and meanness, and deceit, unpunished at the time, but casting their lengthening shadows quite on to the evening of life, Hagar Winter had said to her—

“Child, whatever else you do, never tell a lie. And if you make a promise, keep it.”

Those silver links of memory had led her back into the right track. Clearly, distinctly, as in the quietness of that October evening the words had first been spoken to her, she heard them now—“Never tell a lie.”

And if she married Amos Durben, would not her whole life be a lie—a lie that could never be repented of—never atoned for? She would do right. She would be true to herself. And if, upon the gloom that closed around her now, no dawn should ever rise, better that gloom than any shining which a lie could bring.

So upon that thought Opal cast anchor, and waited for the day.

CHAPTER VI.

BUT had Amos Durben said truly that there was no Hagar Winter now to watch over and protect her? For that very night, whilst his cold, premeditated malice was doing its worst for poor Opal's future, a stern-featured woman in widows' weeds was pacing the village of Morris-thorpe, loitering in the shadow of the chestnut-trees which screened Mr. Guildenstern's house from the road, peering eagerly in, if by chance the door was opened; sometimes stealing quietly down the grassy path to the orchard, from which she could see what was going on in the lighted rooms; for on that side of the house the blinds were rarely drawn down after dark.

It was Hagar Winter. For nine years she had never missed coming down by the excursion train, which ran from London to Cardington and back, for the September fair. She used to lodge, first at one quiet house, and then another, time after time in Cardington, only coming to Morristhorpe when the shadows of evening had fallen, so that she could linger unperceived in the village. Sometimes she caught just a glimpse of her foster-child through that uncurtained window on the garden side of Mr. Guildenstern's house; sometimes she did not, but she never went away again without hearing something about her from the village people; and hitherto she had been well content, for the story they had told had always been of Opal's safety and content.

No one recognised her for the same woman who had long ago been supposed to have met her death amongst the flag-leaves

and sedge banks of Morristhorpe marshes. Her hair was very grey; her face was sharper and thinner than ever. She always wore a suit of widow's weeds when she came to Cardington, with a rusty crape veil tied closely over her face. Her clothes were decent, but poverty-stricken. The people into whose cottages she went to rest—choosing always those where the light burned lowest—thought she was some poor lone woman on her way from Cardington to the great seaport beyond Pondgate marsh. Poor people often did travel afoot from Cardington to Blackhaven, for the railroad went a long way round, and the cheap train seldom suited for time.

Over and over again, as she drew the people on to talk of village matters, especially anything connected with Morristhorpe Grange, she had listened to the story of her own mysterious death—how her bundle of

clothes had been found by the mere side, and her bonnet drifted far down beyond the decoy; and how it was supposed that, being of unsound mind, she had destroyed herself; or, sitting down to rest and sleeping by the brink of the mere, she had fallen in and been carried away by the tide which sometimes rose very strong there. And her grave face never moved a muscle, as they told her of the stories which were afloat in the place—how her ghost was supposed to haunt Morristhorpe Grange, and was to be seen after dark any autumn evening, flitting along noiselessly amongst the sedge near the place where she had disappeared. She did not believe in ghosts herself, she said, but she knew some people who did, and she never said anything against them.

Having learned what she wished to know, that her foster-child was still cared for and well kept by Mr. Guildenstern, and that no-

thing had yet been heard of her parentage, she stole out of the village as quietly as she came into it, under cover of night or in the grey dawn of the morning, and went away back to London, to the decent, humble lodgings, where, ever since she came out of the Cardington asylum, she had earned a living by lace-making and mending, and occasionally going out to nurse sick people, an office for which her lightness of hand and quick, quiet ways especially suited her.

She had even worked hard enough to lay by a little sum for Opal's benefit, should the girl ever need it. For the thought was always in her mind that the time might come when the friends who gave her a home now would give her it no longer. And year by year she came to Morrishorpe with a sickening sense of dread and anxiety lest the worst that she feared might have come to pass, and her foster-child be driven forth

to seek a shelter elsewhere. So long as all was well she contented herself with the knowledge of Opal's content. Though her heart yearned after the orphan girl with a love and longing which she never thought to have felt again, she had not once, through all these years, held speech with her, or looked upon her face to face. Enough that her foster-child was warmed and fed and clothed, whilst she who loved that child better than her own life was still friendless and desolate. Enough that others gave the care which it would have been her joy to give again, as she had given it in years past. Out of the love which her strong faithful heart bore to the motherless alien, she could die for her, or live a lonely life for her sake, content that she was happy, content to look upon her face now and again by stealth, and then go back to the grey-ness and the dreariness and the desolation

of the days which were meted out to her in what she called her home.

This time she had come, as usual, to the village at nightfall. She mixed so little with the people in the village when she lived there, that they were nearly strangers to her now. She knew few of them even by sight, and had a speaking acquaintance with still fewer; but she knew their names from Amos Durben, who often used to go and smoke a pipe with his friends and neighbours at the public-house, and sometimes varied the monotony of her life by a little of the gossip which he had picked up there.

She bent her steps now to old Mrs. Dobbinson's. Mrs. Dobbinson was a widow, tolerably well-to-do, and fond of a bit of chat. In her husband's life-time Amos Durben had sometimes gone in and spent an evening with him; but, until now, Hagar Winter

had never crossed the old lady's threshold.

"Would you kindly let me rest for awhile?" she said, as, in answer to her knock, Mrs. Dobbinson opened the door and peered curiously into the stranger's face. "I am on my way from Cardington."

"Come your ways in," said Mrs. Dobbinson cheerily. "It isn't old Silas Dobbinson's widow as ever turned a lone woman away from her doorstep in the dark; and sit you down here in the chimbley corner. It's nobbut a poorish bit o' fire, but I can soon mend that with a handful o' stick. Thank goodness there's plenty of stick for the poorest in Morristhorpe, since them hedges by the Grange was broken down."

"Oh no! don't do that, please don't," said Hagar, who always preferred to sit in the gloom of any Morristhorpe cottage. "I am not at all cold. I've walked rather fast from Cardington, because, being fair time,

I thought there might be people on the road I should not like to meet."

"Not yet, ma'am, not yet," said the old woman, sagaciously. "They're over-throng in the public's, now. The road doesn't begin to get agate of them while betwixt eleven and twelve, and then you'd be safest out o' t' way. It isn't Mrs. Green, is it; her as keeps the green-grocer's shop just this side Cardington town end?"

"No," said Hagar, "I don't belong to this place."

"Oh! a stranger. Maybe you come from a good bit off."

"Yes, I come from London."

Mrs. Dobbinson sighed, as if that put any further enquiry quite out of the question. To find the whereabouts of anyone who came from London was like looking for a needle in a bundle of hay.

"Ah! London's a wide place to come from.

I never was there myself, but I had a aunt once lived cook with a lady who had some friends as went there regular once a year, and I don't doubt but there's a many wonderful sights to be seed there. Would you a deal rather I didn't put on a bit of stick to make things more cheerful?"

"Not on my account, thank you," said Hagar. "I don't like to sit in a strong light."

"Don't you? Well, that's as folks likes it. I can't say I ever matter much light when I'm set here by myself. You see being nobbut a lone woman, the time goes a bit heavy sometimes, and maybe I drop off to sleep in my arm-chair, or happen gets agate of studying. Old folks has a vast to study about, particler when those they've lived with so long is took. I lay you know summut about that yourself, ma'am."

And Mrs. Dobbinson looked sympathising-

ly at Hagar Winter's crape veil and the gleam of widow's cap behind it.

"Yes," said Hagar, quietly, "I do."

And that was all she said.

Mrs. Dobbinson sat down and studied her guest with an absent, rather unsatisfied air. People who had been much visited with affliction generally had a pride in stating that fact. She herself had been conscious, since her old man was "took," of a decided superiority over those of the village people who had not been distinguished by severe visitations of that kind. After waiting for a few moments, expecting that the stranger might feel drawn out into a statement of her bereavements, she took up the thread of the conversation herself.

"Don't like to speak of 'em, maybe. But it's a bad thing, ma'am, if you'll excuse me saying it, to shut them sort o' visitations down over tight. They're always best talked

about. When you've told a thing, it's off your mind. But I never make no remark. Some goes one way, and some goes another. But when my old man was took, law! it comforted me wonderful, it did, telling everybody how it come about, and how he went at the last as peaceful as a christened baby—which he did, ma'am, on that very bed behind you, with the clergyman to see him, and the blessed Sacrament took day before, and everything about him as was proper, and such a funeral for him as he needn't have had a better, no, not if he'd been a master with a front shop, and apprentice, and all the rest. But I daresay, ma'am, it wouldn't be so much comfort to you to speak of them things. You're one as likes to keep it still."

"Yes," said Hagar wearily. "I never talk much of my troubles. This seems a pretty village of yours."

“Ay, that it do.” And Mrs. Dobbinson, who had frequently wiped her eyes during the previous remarks, brightened up wonderfully. “I always speaks a good word for Morristhorpe village, as there isn’t a prettier on this side kingdom o’ glory, whether you take it for its meadow-land, as beats any other parish I ever heard tell on, or its paster-land, as raises the best butter in Cardington market—or whatever else you take it for, I always says Morristhorpe can’t be beat. I’ve lived in it five and seventy year come next harvest, born and bred in the place, and never spent a day out of it, let alone an odd night at Cardington September fair, when one always reckons to do a bit of pleasuring; for my father lived gamekeeper to the Admiral—I daresay you’ve heard tell of our Admiral, he goes to London every year—and my husband was stable-boy, and got riz to be took into the farm; so you see

I've belonged to the place from the beginning, and don't want to flit for a better while I go to my old man again. It's one in a thousand, is Morrishorpe village."

"I daresay you have seen a good many changes in the place," said Hagar, "if you have lived so long in it."

"That have I, and no mistake. Law! ma'am, one sees a vast o' changes in five-and-seventy years. I can tell of Morrishorpe Grange when you wouldn't ha' known it for the same, what with company, and carriages, and folks coming and going, and the place lighted up from end to end, and the gentlemen going out hunting, and the great ladies from Cardington coming to balls, and bon-fires when young Mr. Darque came of age, as you might see as far as Pondgate beacon, and that's five miles away. It don't look much like that now, though. I lay I shall be dead and gone, and safe with my old man,

afore there's a dance again in them musty old rooms, as they do say the very ceiling's dropping down for the damp and such like. But you've maybe heard of Morristhorpe Grange, ma'am; it's considered a rare fine house for this part of the country."

"Yes," said Hagar, carelessly, "I have heard of the place a good while ago. It isn't occupied now, is it?"

"No, nor isn't likely to be. The gentleman as belongs to it went off promiscus, and nobody knows where he is. Not afore he'd need to go, for he'd done a vast o' mischief in this here place, he had, and many's the one that's need to curse him for it. I lay our Morristhorpe doctor, and a better man never stepped, rues the day he set eyes on Cap'n Darque, for it was the setting on of evil to him, and he's never looked up since to be what he was. And a gentleman as was a pattern for pro-

per behaviour, and come to see my old man when he were laid ill, and give him his medicines, and wouldn't take a penny for 'em, as it isn't a many would ha' done it, and him not to call rich, as he isn't, along of Cap'n Darque."

"Ah! I daresay, having lived so long in the place, you know most of the people here."

Mrs. Dobbinson's look was distantly suggestive of indignation, but it quieted into pity as she remembered that the person whom she addressed was a stranger in the place.

"*Most* of 'em, ma'am? Most of 'em, did you say? Well, I reckon there don't many go past this door-step from week end to week end as I don't know where they come from, and what they're after, let alone tramps and that sort, as I don't make it my business to keep no look-out after 'em. And if anybody comes past as I can't square 'em up

satisfactory, I just step out and axes while I get to know. I can't abear folks going past and me not to know 'em, unless, as I said, it was tramps, and that sort. I was pretty nigh beat, though, this afternoon with a gentleman as come past when I was set in the window, as well-dressed a gentleman as ever I see, and I couldn't make him out, no *that* I couldn't, and for all it lay upon me as clear as anything that I'd seed him afore, but I couldn't straighten it to myself when nor where. My daughter Bessy come in and told me all about him, though, just a bit afore you was going past. She hears a vast, does my daughter Bessy, and she comes in most days to tell me; but it's made a fine stir has this here gentleman coming, I can tell."

"Indeed," said Hagar. "It seems a quiet place. But I daresay it can be stirred up sometimes."

“Ay, that can it. You should have been here when poor Hagar Winter, her as lived at Morrithorpe Grange to keep it open, got her death in the mere; and for all they dragged it night and day, never a bit of her did they see again. I always said they wouldn’t. The water runs away so fast when the tide’s up, and she’d be half-way out to sea before ever they missed her.”

“There was a stir, then, when she died.”

“Pretty well of a stir, but nothing like to what there is now along of this gentleman coming. He’s sort of kin to her, Amos Durben, as used to keep the ’coy—Squire Lester’s ’coy. There was a ’coy up at the mere a good bit since, while they started draining for the new rail; and then it had to be give up, and him to seek something else. And a good thing too, for he went to Australy; and now he’s come back, they

say he's rich enough to buy Morristhorpe over and over."

Hagar Winter started, and bent eagerly forward. It was well that the thick veil hid that eager, hungry look upon her face. Still, even Amos Durben knew nothing. His coming might make no difference to the child.

"Ay, ma'am, you may well start. It isn't every day one hears of the like of that, and him going out with scarce a suit to his back, and nothing but his wage from Squire Lester, and a bit of money as the Squire give him for lossing his situation unbeknown, and from no fault of his, which it wasn't. But if he's brought gain for hisself, he's brought sorrow for some one else, I can tell. There's the poor young lady at Mr. Guildenstern's."

Hagar's heart sank within her. She knew all that was coming now. With a slow, dull, tightening sense of pain, she listened

while the old woman told her tale—a tale which she had been dreading to hear for the last nine years.

“Ay, he went right past this door to the doctor’s house on the green, as there isn’t a better man nor more respected in the parish; but folks little thought what he was a-going to tell them. Mr. Guildenstern had a young lady living with them this good many years past, as were put to be nurse-child to Hagar Winter, and nobody ever knew who she was, nor where she come from, but only Mr. Guildenstern took her when Hagar Winter went crazed, as she did used to go crazed odd times, and then get a turn for sense again, as you might never know she ailed ought. And he’s done for the young lady all along same as if she were his own, and always gived it out as she shouldn’t want for a home while he could keep one over her head. You know,

there is a Providence, ma'am, over them as can't help themselves."

Hagar bent her head, but said nothing.

"Yes, always a Providence, as I said when the parish give me a extra shilling on account of my poor man being took. Well, this gentleman—and he's a rare gentleman now, for all he went away with nothing to bless hisself with—he says he married a party out there, Lois Fletcher, and she's the one as brought Mr. Guildenstern's young lady to Hagar Winter to be nursed when she were a baby. And she out with it all to Amos Durben; and he's brought his tale here to tell, and a nice tale, too, for he says the bairn is Captain and Mrs. Darque's daughter, and he's got papers as proves it, and everything proper."

The old woman stopped to take breath, but Hagar, sitting there opposite to her, still as any stone, made no sign.

“A pretty boiling of broth, as my old man used to say, when things turned out as wasn’t looked for. For, ma’am, if you’ll me believe, there wasn’t a greater villain in all the country-side than this very Captain Darque, and ruined Mr. Guildenstern, he did, with getting him into some mines, as he’s never looked up out of since; and then, to think of his taking a bairn, and doing for her along with his own, as belonged to such a stock, and him having to leave his big house at top of the green, and the poor children almost straitened of their vittles when they was young, and his bonnie young wife dying of a broken heart, as everybody said she did, not being able to bide the change of everything from what she’d been accustomed to. Eh! ma’am, but it’s a queer world, and there’s a deal o’ queer things happens in it.”

“Yes,” said Hagar, huskily. “But the

gentleman might perhaps keep her still, as it isn't her fault."

"Why, no, ma'am, it isn't to call her fault; but everybody knows bairns must walk in the shoes their fore-elders made for 'em, let 'em be easy or let 'em be t'other way. And she may thank goodness she's got a good upbringing as far as she has, afore it got out about her father. My daughter Bessy's been working at the doctor's to-day, and she says there's been an awful carrying on about it. There can't be nothing done to-night, for the doctor is out, and he has the say of everything; but Miss Armitage—that's his wife's sister as lives with them, she's always been sort of disagreeable to the young lady, and couldn't see it right as she should be there at all. And let alone that, she was dead set against Captain Darque, because he'd got her sister's fortin too, and would have cursed him right and left if that

sort of thing had been genteel, but she never heerd his name spoke without heaping something bad on top of it; and now she finds out the young lady belongs to him she says she'll have her out of the house if it's the union she has to go to for it. Law! ma'am, it's all over Morrishorpe by this time. For there isn't a man in the parish but what knows Captain Darque for a scamp and a rascal, and the house he lived in standing under a curse as you may say, let alone the ghost as walks there ever since Hagar Winter met her death in the mere."

"It's an awful story," said Hagar. "I wonder what the poor girl will do!"

"Indeed, ma'am, that's more than anyone can tell; but I do know this, she won't have that roof over her head much longer. They haven't run it easy together this good bit past, hasn't her and Miss Armitage; and

I lay this here'll finish it, for she's that sperit has Miss Opal, that she won't stay nowhere where she isn't made welcome. It's a bad thing when a proud sperit and a lean purse goes in the same pocket."

"Yes," said Hagar, "it is. I've been sitting a long time—it must be getting late. I'm much obliged to you for giving me a rest."

"Oh! not at all, ma'am, not at all. I'm always glad for them as needs it to sit them down and welcome by my bit of fire. And I wish it had been a better, only as you said you weren't particlar, I thought I might as well save my kindling for them as were. I hope it isn't far you've got to go?"

And old Mrs. Dobbinson looked curiously at her visitor, who was preparing to depart. No one had ever crossed that threshold before, in her time, without giving a proper

account of who they were and what they came for.

“You said you was a stranger, ma’am.”

“Yes; from London.”

“Ay. I heard tell of some one from London coming here once before about fair time. But London’s a wide place, and it mightn’t be you.”

“Yes, London is a very wide place, quite different to Morrishorpe. I’ll wish you good night, and thank you.”

“You didn’t say whether you’d far to go,” said Mrs. Dobbinson, suggestively.

“No, not far to-night. I know some people a little farther on beyond the village.”

“Oh! at the Pondgate toll, maybe?”

“Yes, near the Pondgate toll.”

“Ay, then you’ll be all right, for it’s a good road there, and the fair people not turned out yet. The roads is none of them safe when the fair people has turned out.

Good night to you, ma'am ; and if you've got far to go after Pondgate, I wish you safe there."

"Thank you."

And with that Hagar Winter went out into the dark again.

CHAPTER VII.

SO then the time had come, and Opal did want a friend!

As Hagar Winter tracked her way along the gloomy village street, no thought of joy at Amos Durben's return, or of possible gain which might arise to her from it, crossed her mind. She was only pondering how she might help and comfort this poor girl, whose mother, in her own great desolation, had cared for and comforted her, and for whom she had promised to care so long as care of hers was needed.

She had kept that promise as only women like Hagar Winter can keep a promise; not for hire, not for reward, scarcely even so

much for love as for that stern, rigid, steadfast sense of duty and trust which, when all love has gone, forms the inspiration of some women's lives.

She had long waited for this time to come. And her only prayer had been that when it did come, when the blow which, sooner or later must be given, was about to fall, she might be at hand to shield Opal from its crushing weight. And now her prayer was heard. God had given her full many bitter things in the years gone by, but He had given her the sweetness at last of being able to fulfil her promise, of being able to succour one who had no friend but herself.

She went cautiously down the village street, avoiding as far as possible the tracks of light which shone out from the cottage windows, until she reached the old house among the chestnut-trees. All looked plea-

sant and quiet as usual about it. No outward show was there of the terrible grief and loss which, for one at least in that household, had been wrought since day went down.

As she trod the little path towards the orchard gate, she could see figures passing to and fro within the uncurtained windows; one, whose crouching gait might be that of her step-brother, Amos Durben. No sign within or without of disquiet and discomfort. It seemed as if already her child had been cast forth from the house, as if agony, grief, loss of hers had no longer any leave to disturb its peace.

She was wondering whether she should go boldly up to the door and ask for Opal, when she saw something stirring in the orchard, and heard a footstep upon the dry, fallen leaves.

She leaned over the low gate. It was

Opal, pacing to and fro. She knew that slight, tall form again, though she had never seen it bent so low before with shame and sorrow. She knew that face, though very pale and sad, for she had stood and watched it many a time, as side by side with Eulie's, within those uncurtained windows, it had lighted up with hope and interest, as now it scarce could ever light again. She was walking quickly, restlessly; her head now buried in her hands, now thrown proudly back with a gesture of exceeding pride and defiance. Sometimes she would draw herself up and stand still for a moment, as though bidding away some intruder; then again resume that restless, uneasy walk.

At last, with a low, weary moan of despair, she crouched under one of the trees, and laying her face to the ground, as she used to do years and years ago in the old garden of Morrithorpe Grange, she sobbed

out, "Mother Hagar! Oh! Mother Hagar!"

Hagar Winter went up to her. She put back the veil from her face, and stooping down, said,

"Opal, I'm here."

Opal looked up for one moment into that face, so familiar in its grave sternness, so still, so white, so steady; no tears even now glistening in the sad eyes, but only that look of perfect truth; and then again she crept into the arms which held her now as closely as when, a little child, helpless, friendless, Lois Fletcher first laid her there, saying to Hagar Winter,

"You know what you have to do for her."

"Mother Hagar, they told me you were dead."

A cold shimmering smile passed over Hagar Winter's face.

"Yes, child. I've been dead long enough.

All of me that was worth anything died thirty years ago ; but I shan't die any more whilst you want a friend. I know that, clear enough. I promised I would take care of you, and I never broke a promise yet. You do know me, then ?”

“Yes,” said Opal, sadly, “and I know myself, too, now.”

And then with a passionate burst of tears, she cried out,

“Oh ! Mother Hagar, take me away ! Take me away, Mother Hagar, anywhere, anywhere. I don't care where, only take me away !”

“That's what I mean to do, child,” said Hagar, gravely. “This is no place for you, now. I know all about it. Go in and put a few things together, and come with me. Don't ask me any more questions, but just do as I tell you. Bring what you can carry in your hands, and I will take you

home with me to-night. You will be safe with Mother Hagar, child, if you're safe nowhere else. They'll never miss you in the house, I daresay."

"No. Amos Durben and Miss Armitage are busy talking in the drawing-room." Opal shivered as she spoke his name, and nestled closer to Hagar Winter's breast, the only place where she could be safe and warm now. "Nobody will miss me until to-morrow."

"And it won't matter then, child. Go."

Opal went to her own room, looked out what clothes she could put into a travelling-bag, together with the prayer-book and register, which as yet Hagar had not seen. Then she went into the little painting-room, gathered up her drawing materials and the picture of Morristhorpe Grange which was quite finished now. After that she sat down and wrote a very short note to Mr. Guildenstern,

leaving it on the mantelpiece. Then wrapping herself up warmly, for the cold of that October night had chilled her through, she gave one lingering, longing look round the little room, and returned to Hagar Winter who was waiting for her in the orchard.

As she passed down the garden, she saw by the light shining through the drawing-room windows, Miss Armitage and Amos Durben engaged in eager conversation; the paper which contained Lois Fletcher's story spread out before them. It was all right; they would not miss her. There was no one to say good-bye to. Mr. Guildenstern was in London. Perhaps he might be sorry when he came back and found her gone, but he had never really needed anything that she could give him, and so her absence could bring him but little loss. As for Eulie, gentle, loving little Eulie, Gilbert would soon kiss away any tears that fell for the

loss of her adopted sister. A closer caress, a kinder word from him, and the past would be as though it had never been. Well, for those, who, loving and beloved, were sheltered from all other loss.

And Lancelot. It was well with him too. Her love could only have been a burden to him, even if he had cared for it, and Miss Armitage's last words had taught her to doubt that. He would be happier with Miss Luxmore, who could put him beyond the need of toiling and waiting and striving as he must have toiled and waited and striven for a penniless wife, even if that wife had had a fair name and an honourable descent to bring him. No, there was no home for her now, in Lancelot's thoughts. The last, best kindness she could do him, whom she loved better than her own life, was to leave him alone.

"Are you ready, child?" said Hagar Win-

ter, who was standing by the orchard gate. "I have waited long for you. Give me the bag. There is a near road, is there not, across the fields to Cardington? I have walked it before."

And so she had, with Amos Durben to the asylum.

"Yes, across Mr. Guildenstern's field and then along the footpath. It is a great deal nearer than the turnpike road."

"I know that. Let us go. Keep close to me; you need not be afraid, now."

"I am not afraid," said Opal.

CHAPTER VIII.

SCARCELY a word was spoken between them until they reached Cardington' station. They had to hurry along, for the night train to London started at nine o'clock, and they had but half an hour for the nearly two miles which lay between them and the town. The platform and all the ticket offices were crowded with people, returning to various places in the neighbourhood from Cardington fair, so that nobody noticed the spare woman in widow's weeds, nor the tall closely veiled girl by her side, who took their seats in a second-class carriage for London. And there was no one else in the carriage, for

that was a through train from the north, and did not set down passengers at any of the intermediate stations from which people usually came to the fair.

When they had started, Hagar Winter took off her woollen shawl, and made a pillow of it for Opal. Then she bade her lie down, and covering her as well as she was able with her own dress, said—

“Sleep, child, if you can. There’s nothing like sleep, if only it will come to you.”

It came to Opal, the sleep of utter, helpless weariness, smoothing out the hard lines of anxiety and pain, and leaving only a look of patient, uncomplaining sadness, reminding Hagar Winter strangely of the little baby-face, over which, eighteen years ago, she had bent, reading in it a faint, far-off reminder of the poor dead mother, whose tears could fall upon it no more.

But Hagar never slept. All through the long, dark hours of that night she watched over Opal, quieting her, as a nurse might quiet some frightened child, when, from time to time, as the train stopped, the poor girl, startled, sprang up, and looked wildly round her with words of terror, which showed only too plainly the strain, both of mind and body, through which she had passed. Then Hagar Winter would hold her to her bosom, and rock her gently to and fro, until, by-and-by, the heavy eyelids dropped again, and the scared look faded away. And sometimes, if Opal moved uneasily in her sleep, she would pass her hand gently over her forehead, with light quick touches, which seemed to have a sort of magnetic power to soothe. But all this was done gravely and sternly, with no tear of love shining in the great sad eyes, no tender, mother-like smile softening the rigid outlines of a face

out of whose windows the soul had ceased to look.

In the dim grey dawn of very early morning, the train reached King's Cross. Hagar Winter gathered up their scanty store of luggage, and taking Opal's arm under hers, led her away through silent deserted streets, in which the sound of their own footsteps seemed to startle them, until they came into the neighbourhood of Brompton. Then she struck out of the main road down a side street, which led to a row of small respectable houses, chiefly occupied by people who let lodgings. At the door of one of these houses she knocked, and after they had stood waiting for some time, a woman put her head out of the upper window. Hagar spoke—

“I've come back, Mrs. Grey.”

“All right, ma'am. I'll be down in a minute. I thought it would be you.”

Soon afterwards she made her appearance at the door, with a cloak thrown hastily over her. She dropped a respectful curtsy to Hagar Winter, and another to the pale, worn-out-looking girl at her side.

"Come in, ma'am. I expected it would be you, as you mostly come back by this night train. You've got company, though, this time, ma'am, and that's a new thing for you," added the woman, looking questioningly at Opal.

"Yes," said Hagar. "This young lady is a friend of mine. She has come to stay with me for some time."

"Of course, ma'am, and a deal comfortabler for yourself. Come in, ma'am," and the woman took them upstairs into a small, sparsely furnished, but daintily clean room. "I laid the fire, and put some water ready in the kettle, and there's everything in the cupboard same as you left it yesterday. I'll

have a good blaze, ma'am, up, whilst you and the young lady takes your things off. It's breakfast for two, I suppose."

"Yes, for two now."

"All right, ma'am, and a deal comfortabler for yourself. I always said you'd be a deal better off if you could happen on anybody to keep you company, being left so much to yourself, though you do get out pretty well. There's been a lady, ma'am, about some lace work, and a messenger from the hospital to say you would be wanted next week to change with a nurse somewhere; and that's all, ma'am, I think, since you went away. The lady said it wasn't particular about the work—she could call again, and there's the place written down there where the messenger said you'd be wanted."

"Thank you, Mrs. Grey. I am much obliged to you. Now, Miss Opal, I will take you into my bedroom."

Hagar Winter spoke this name clearly, distinctly, looking both at Opal and Mrs. Grey as she spoke it. And that was the name Captain Darque's daughter bore so long as she remained in London.

She followed Hagar into another room, just across the landing, the same size as the parlour, and as severely simple in its arrangements. There Hagar helped her to take off her things, arranging them all in different drawers or boxes, with a quickness and precision which showed her to be well acquainted with such attendance. Then she bade her go back to the parlour, where Mrs. Grey had made a bright little fire, and spread a simple meal upon the table before it.

Presently she made her appearance, without the widow's weeds, dressed in a plain brown stuff gown, such as she used to wear in an afternoon at Morristhorpe Grange,

a white kerchief folded over her shoulders, a close, thick white cap covering her grey hair, and tied down under her chin, with black ribbon. It was the sort of dress which most of the nurses at the hospital wore, and it was exactly in keeping with Hagar Winter's grave, quiet, unruffled aspect.

"Thank you, Mrs. Grey, you have made everything very comfortable," she said, as the landlady bustled about the table. "We will not keep you any longer now. Go back to bed. It is almost the middle of the night yet, you know, for us London people."

"Thank you, ma'am. I do feel a bit sleepy."

Mrs. Grey curtsayed and withdrew. Hagar Winter waited until she heard her stirring about overhead.

"Now, child," when they were left alone together in the dim dawn of that early morning, all around and about them that

strange influence which used to ray out from Hagar Winter's presence like the hush and stillness of twilight. It was not peace, it was not comfort; her face was too stern and rigid for either, but just a brooding sense of restraint and safety. "Now, child."

And then Opal told what old Mrs. Dobbinson had left untold. She described her chance meeting with Amos Durben in the menagerie, explained how he had followed her to Morris-thorpe, and, Mr. Guildenstern being away, had told his story to Miss Armitage, verifying it by the production of the prayer-book, her mother's prayer-book, and the copy of her baptismal register.

"Ah!" said Hagar Winter, "and did he give you them?"

"He did not give me them; but I have them. I have brought them with me."

"That is well. All that you have from your mother you may be proud of. Go on."

Then Opal told how Miss Armitage had upbraided her with her father's disgrace, and the ruin which he had brought upon an innocent family; then of Amos Durben's hateful proposal that she should marry him, and go back with him to Australia, in which case he would refund the money Mr. Guildenstern had lost through Captain Darque. And that he was to come the next morning to Mr. Guildenstern's house to receive her final answer.

"God forbid that you should marry Amos Durben, child," said Hagar Winter, "or any other man you don't love, if it was to win back Mr. Guildenstern twice as many thousands as your father has lost him."

"I knew you would say so, Mother Hagar, Yours was the only voice that seemed to tell me to be true to myself when I was walking up and down there in the orchard, and wondering what I ought to do. For I thought of my father hiding away out of

his country in shame, and Mr. Guildenstern toiling and striving so hard, and Lancelot kept back from the place that he ought to have had."

Hagar Winter saw the red glow on Opal's cheeks, and marked the slight, almost imperceptible change of tone with which she spoke that name.

"And I knew that Amos Durben could make it all right, so that I might look—so that I might look them all in the face, and feel that they had lost nothing through father of mine. And, Mother Hagar, I was nearly doing it, for my life seemed so black then that it could not be blacker even if I had to spend it all with him; but I remembered what you said to me one night when you were reading to me in the kitchen at Morristhorpe Grange, that I was never to tell a lie, and that if I made a promise I was to keep it. And my life would have been a

whole long lie if I had married him, even if he had been twice as rich, yes, and noble and good, too; for I could never have given him what——”

And there Opal paused, the glow upon her face telling all the rest.

Hagar Winter asked no questions, and she turned her face away into the shadow, that Opal might not think herself observed.

“You did well, child, to come away from Amos Durben. He is no husband for you, even if he can give you all that gold can buy. God send that whoever you love, Opal, may be true and faithful. And if not——”

Hagar Winter bent her brows, and her thin lips tightened.

“If not, Opal, keep your own truth fast for both. There are worse things than living lonely—there is nothing worse than living a lie.”

After that they sat quiet for a long time. Opal was the first to speak.

“Mother Hagar,” she said, “tell me about these things. I know nothing but what Amos Durben told me, and how do I know that he told me true?”

“He told you truly enough, Opal, what I would fain have kept from you, that your father was a shame and disgrace to the child that bears his name. There’s many a one round Morristhorpe rues the day when they trusted his winning looks, and let his fair speeches beguile them out of their honest earnings; ay, and more, too, for gold may come where gold has gone, but a fair name and a good conscience come never back again when once they’re lost.”

“Still my mother must have loved him.”

“Yes, she did, and she loved him to the last; and it wasn’t to her, gentle as she looked, that any one dare say an ill word of

him. For I've seen her eye flash and her face light up—you mind me of her a little yourself, Opal whiles, now that you're a woman grown—when his own mother, who had come to hate him for his badness, would have her leave him. 'Mother,' I heard her say to the old lady, Mrs. Darque—'mother, I loved him once, and I can't give over loving him now.' It is so with some, Opal. They don't change with change in them they love, but having given their word they keep it, right on till death."

"Well for them too," Hagar Winter continued, her pale face growing paler as she spoke. "It's better to be able to love on, ay, though your love brings you nought but sorrow, than for it to die out and fall to ashes, and leave your life all cold and dead and dark; and then for you not to die too, when it's better to die than to live."

"But, child, you go to sleep. You've a

deal to fetch back after what you've gone through. There's nothing heals like sleep when you can have it. Well for them that can. And I want to be quiet, too."

She made Opal lie down upon the hard little sofa, drew her face away into the shadow, covered her with shawls, and soon had the satisfaction of seeing her drop to sleep again. With something like a smile upon her own poor thin face she marked the look of rest steal over Opal's, and murmured to herself, as through the quiet morning hours she watched her there,

"It's well for them that can."

CHAPTER IX.

WHEN Opal awoke there was no one in the room but herself. The breakfast had been cleared away. Everything looked very neat and tidy—almost painfully so. The sun was shining in through the striped green blinds, but Opal had left her watch in the other room, and she did not know what time it was. Presently Mrs. Grey came in with a plate of sandwiches and a cup of coffee.

“I was to bring you this, Miss, about dinner-time. Mrs. Winter’s gone out; she mostly goes out every day, and sometimes doesn’t get back while afternoon, according as her work lies. And so she said if she didn’t

come in at noon I was to bring you something—same as she has it for her dinner when she's by herself—and you was to make yourself comfortable while she come back."

With that Mrs. Grey departed, leaving Opal to herself again.

It seemed like a dream. Yesterday at this time talking to Lancelot under the shadow of the orchard trees, all round them the sweet autumn sunshine, the crimson falling leaves, the touch of gold on distant woods, the soft blue haze brooding over Morristhorpe Grange, the long lines of pollard willows and fringe of alder bushes stretching away by the mere side to Mr. Lester's decoy, the sounds of village life so near, the old familiar faces round her; herself no stranger, but at home amongst those who had cared for her almost since she could remember. To-day in a dim quiet little room, alone in the great world of London, her whole

possession in the past swept away from her ; her name, her friends, her hopes, her little simple pleasures, her occupations gone ; a new, unaccustomed life lying blankly before her, its outlines vague, indistinct, indefinite ; no certainty about anything save that she must begin the world afresh ; nothing to give her present position the aspect of reality, or to identify her with her former self, except the presence of Hagar Winter. And now even Hagar Winter was away. Without the figure of that grave quiet woman, gliding noiselessly about the room, as Opal, half waking, half sleeping, had watched her glide a few hours before, everything seemed so baffling and bewildering. Hagar Winter was the only reality to her now, in a chaos of possibilities and confusions.

Hagar did not return until evening. She had gone to the hospital, and thence had been sent to do some nursing in the neigh-

bourhood. Afterwards she had gone to some of the great houses about her lace work. She seemed tired when she came in, but she would not let Opal do anything for her, not even carry away her shawl and bonnet, or help her to arrange the table for tea.

"It isn't your place, child," she said, when Opal would fain have been as a daughter to her. "I always helped myself, and I always shall. You need never offer to do anything for me. It isn't what I've been accustomed to. It's my place to do for others, not to be done for."

Just the same chill, distant feeling crept into Opal's heart, then, as when, years and years ago, a little desolate, companionless child she used to sit by Hagar Winter's side in the old kitchen at Morrithorpe Grange; and yet with it, now as then, there came the dim consciousness of something deeper and better beyond it, a love that she could neither reach

nor fathom, kept for her behind that grave reserve, never showing itself by word or look or caress; but there still, forming a mute, unacknowledged bond between them. Whilst she had Hagar Winter, even if all the years to come gave her no other friend, she would be safe.

“And now tell me more about my mother,” she said, as they sat together in the firelight after tea, Hagar’s fingers busily employed upon the lace work which was her incessant occupation at home. “Tell me about my mother and yourself, and how you came to love her so.”

“That’s a long story, Opal; but you’re a woman now, and maybe the darkness will come to you some day, and then you’ll know that others have gone through it before. There’s never a cup in this world so bitter but others have known its bitterness, ay, and will again before the end comes. And so I’ll

tell it right from the beginning. It's a heavy story, Opal, both mine and your mother's, but true for all that; and if I could keep it from you, you should never have to tell such a one for yourself, but that isn't as we choose.

“It happened this way that I came to know your mother. We were both born in the same town, down in Buckinghamshire, and I daresay not long between each other by as much as I could tell of your mother's age; but I was brought up to sit at a lace pillow and make Honiton sprays—there's a deal of that work done in Buckinghamshire, Opal—and she was brought up to wear the pretty things after I'd made them; and rare and beautiful I don't doubt she looked in them, for she was a fair woman, was your mother, as fair as any in the place. It's lowly that weaves and lofty that wears, and I daresay she never turned my way, except she might want a new pocket-handkerchief or a fresh bit of lace to set

round her white shoulders. But I didn't care for all that. She was where God had put her, and I was where He had put me; and for happiness maybe I'd the most of it then, for I looked to have a home of my own some day, and to sit a wife at my own fireside; and a girl who looks for that doesn't care so much whether she weaves or whether she wears, so long as the one she loves is true."

"Yes, you wouldn't think to look at me now, Opal, that anyone could ever have loved me; but things are different from what they used to be, thirty years ago. God send me that in thirty years to come they may be different again! Well, I loved a young man then, Mark Renneson was his name, and I was promised to marry him. He worked at the engine sheds on the railway, as clever a workman as any there, and a tall, straight, well-made young man as any girl might be proud of to walk side by

side of him. Ay, and wasn't I proud, too, when he had cleaned himself, and put off his working blouse, and walked down the town with me on a summer evening, and talked of that time come next year, when he was to have his rise of wages, and we had settled to be married?"

Opal crept a little nearer to Hagar Winter, and laid her hand gently on the long, thin fingers which were fitting to and fro so rapidly over the lace-work. But Hagar never acknowledged the mute caress; she only went on working, and speaking gravely, mechanically as ever.

"I have to tell you all this, Opal, though it isn't a sweet story to remember, or you can't know how I came to love your mother as I did. Well, the summer got over, and in autumn the contractor that Mark worked for took a great concern to superintend in South America, and wanted a staff

of sharp, quick, clever men that could work well, to go out along with him; and he offered Mark great pay, three times as much as ever he'd had before, if he would go out for three years, and a good situation at home after that. I couldn't say him nay when he came to tell me about it, for I saw it would be such a lift for him as he mightn't have again; and father and mother thought it would be a fine thing, too, for he was to have the head workman's place in the sheds when he came back, if only he kept steady, and did all according to the agreement. Besides, we were both of us very young, I not being much turned of nineteen, and we could afford to wait three years, which was the time the contractor wanted him out for.

“So he went away. It didn't seem to me that I'd lost him, I loved him so much; and though I was but a girl, I'd a strong heart,

and what I did give I gave right well, never to take it back again, never. It's a great thing to give, is your love, when you can't play fast and loose with it, and I never could with mine. Well, I worked on very hard with my lace-making, for it was a trade I could make a great deal of money by, there not being many in the town that had a quicker hand for it than I had; and I wanted to lay something by, so that when Mark came home he mightn't have everything to do for me. You know I told you just now, Opal, when I came in, that it hadn't ever been my way to have much done for me, it always seemed most natural for me to be doing for other people. It was well I did earn something, though I didn't happen to want it for what I expected; for the year after Mark went away, mother fell ill, and what I could make came in handy for her. I had a good spirit to my work, too, for Mark

kept writing to me, and telling me how well he was getting on, and what a great deal the people out there thought about him—a great deal more, he said, than anybody had ever done at home; and that his master thought of setting up a concern there, and him to stop and help in the management of it, which he said he shouldn't decide about until the three years were up, and he came home to marry me. If I liked after that, but not unless I liked, we might go out together, he said.

“Mother got about again, though she was never very strong after that illness. My brother Amos was a lad then, a page to a gentleman in the town, but he only just got as much as kept him comfortable, and couldn't do anything for us. As soon as mother got on her feet again, father fell ill, and died, just before the three years were out. I had a sore time of it with him, for mother being

so delicate, and Amos out of the house, I did all the tending of him; and I had my lace-making, too, for with him being off work so long I had to earn for all of us. However, I never felt it overmuch, for there was always sunshine to look to at the end; and when I was sore pressed and weary with the coming and the going, I didn't say my prayers, as maybe I ought to have done; but I took out a lock of his hair, and I looked at it and said to myself, Mark is coming home next July, and that made me strong again. There's nothing, Opal, you can't do so long as those you love are true to you.

“Well, July came, and Mark came too. And he didn't come alone either, for he brought with him as bonnie a young wife as ever you need wish to look upon, in this or in any other country. You needn't look at me in that way, Opal—it's nothing to be

shocked at. It's a thing that's been done over and over again, for a man to bring home a bonnie young wife when the girl that he ought to have married waits for him and trusts in him. And you needn't call him a wretch either, for she was fair to look upon, and of a better upbringing too than I was, and one that he would never need to blush for, let him rise to be as grand as he might. Of course he never came to see me, but he led her past our cottage door one day when I was sitting in the window with my work, and I saw by the look in her face that she loved him, and I tried to be content.

“But I never forgave him, Opal—never. It may be wicked, but we can't always do what's right. And that's why I don't go to church now, for I couldn't take a lie upon my lips, and it would be a lie to say the Lord's Prayer after the clergyman, feeling as

I do to Mark Renneson. Maybe God has forgiven him, I don't know. If He has, Mark doesn't want any forgiveness of mine, so I'm doing him no harm by keeping it back.

“But you will be wearying to know what all this has to do with your mother, and that's what I'm coming to now. The Sunday after Mark came home, I went to church to see him and his bride sit together. It was a pretty sight; she seemed to nestle up so close to him, as if he was all the world to her, which I dare-say he was. I don't remember anything for a long, long time after that. When I came right again I was in an asylum, and had been for a year. When I came out with a certificate from the doctor that I was all right, and went back home, there wasn't a home to go to any more, for mother was dead too, and Amos had got a place somewhere else. Then it was that your mother heard about me, and took me to wait upon her. She was a young

lady living at home then, and I used to sew for her, and dress her, and sometimes read to her, for mother had given me all the learning she could. And she would talk to me very kindly and sweetly sometimes, about the trouble I had gone through, and hoped I should find someone to love me again, that I might be happy with him. I listened to it all; I couldn't help but listen, for her voice was as sweet as summer rain upon the flowers; but it was only a voice—it never touched my heart. Because, you know, I had no heart to touch then. I felt something go out of me that Sunday when I sat in church, watching Mark Renneson and his bride, and I knew then it could never come to me again, never any more at all. I was just as much dead, all of me that could love and be loved, as if I'd been shut up in a coffin and put in one of the old vaults under the church. I sometimes wonder where it's gone, that part of

me; whether God is taking care of it somewhere, and will ever give me it back again. I don't know.

“I hadn't lived with your mother very long when she married Captain Darque, and came to live at Morristhorpe Grange. He was a handsome man, was your father, Opal, and of winning speech—the sort that a loving, trustful woman can't resist. I didn't know him so well then as I've known him since, but I've always thought there must be some good in him, or a woman like your mother would never have clung to him as she did. She wouldn't let me leave her when she was married, for she knew, I daresay, that, things being with me as they were, I should find it hard to get another place. So I came with her when she came a bride to the Grange, and I stayed there with her whilst the sunlight faded bit by bit out of her young life, and I, whom she had once comforted, had to

comfort her for all the sorrow he had wrought, and for the tears he had won from her eyes, which had never looked into his with anything but love.

“At last, when they had not been married more than a few years, things got so that he was obliged to leave. People began to whisper such evil things of him that it was scarcely safe for him to be out in daylight, either in his own place or at Cardington. And he finished up all by some cheaterly with the Penorfa mines. A man may do a many bad things and be an honourable man, as the world goes; but he can’t cheat people out of their money, and hold up his head after it. So things began to be shifted away quietly out of the Grange, by a few at a time, at night, and the furniture was all sealed; and one night a boat came up the mere, and Captain and Mrs. Darque got in, and rowed away down to the nearest port, where they took ship for abroad.

I never knew where, for, of course, it wasn't safe for him to tell ; but I was left behind with my step-brother, Amos Durben, who had come to keep Mr. Lester's decoy. The Captain said he might live with me rent-free for company ; and I never heard anything more of your mother, until a letter came from Melbourne, more than five years after, written, as she said, with her dying hand, to ask me if I would take care of you. The November after, Lois Fletcher brought you, and I did for you until that time, when I had to go to the Cardington Asylum. You know the rest."

CHAPTER X.

OPAL listened sadly and silently to Hagar Winter's story. She dare give no token, by word or look, of the love that was stirring in her heart towards this stern, yet faithful woman, so stern in her unforgiveness, so faithful in her love. Hagar worked rapidly on at her lace-work. Her fingers had never rested during all that bitter tale of deceit and wrong, save when Opal's hand was laid upon them for a moment in that mute caress. To work, and to work, and to work, was her only relief now from a past whose memory was sometimes almost too heavy to be borne.

"No, I don't know all the rest," Opal said, when Hagar had brought her story to a close.

“After I went to Mr. Guildenstern’s, they told me that you had gone away for a long time, and then they said that you were drowned.”

“Of course. I know all about that. They thought that night, after I came out of the Cardington Asylum, that I had missed my footing in walking by the mere, or else that I had thrown myself in on purpose. I knew they would think that. My head is not always clear, Opal, but when it is clear, it is very clear, and I seem to see in a sort of vision what is the sharpest thing to do. That night, when I came out of the asylum, I went in to rest at the gatekeeper’s cottage. She did not know me, for we had never seen each other. She had only come to the place a little while before I was ill, and you know I never went much into the village. She told me about my brother Amos having gone to Australia. It was a sore grief to me, for I could not but fear he might chance upon Lois Fletcher there, and

learn from her who you were. And then the woman told me about Mr. Guildenstern having taken you, and promising to do for you as his own child, until you were claimed again.

“I went down the village after that ; it was very dark, and no one saw me. I stopped among the chestnut-trees by Mr. Guildenstern’s house. You and Eulie were playing in one of the front rooms. I could see you very well, for the blinds were up, and you were sitting on the hearth-rug in the firelight. You looked bright and happy ; you were dressed as I could never have dressed you, like a little lady. Eulie had her arms about your neck. I knew she loved you, and I thought her love would be better to you than mine. I had promised your mother that I would take care of you as long as you needed a friend—at least, I had promised it to myself when I read her letter, and I had tried to do my duty to you ever since, so far as I knew it. And as I stood outside in

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the gloom, and saw you in the brightness, looking so happy, and remembered Mr. Guildenstern's words that he would do for you as his own until you were claimed, I thought it would be no kindness in me to claim you. Better let him think I was dead; if so, he would always shelter and protect you. For I could not have given to you as he gave, and to have taken you back to that old house by the mere would have been to take you from plenty to poverty, from a home where all was fair and pleasant, to one where you must have known many a sore want as the years went on.

“And it came into my mind then, that if I went and left my bundle by the reeds, and let my bonnet drift down the stream, they would be found next day, and people would think I had been drowned. So I did it. And with the little money I drew out of the Cardington Bank I went to London. I knew something of the place, for my father and mother lived there

when I was very young ; and I got these lodgings and began to do lace work, or anything that came handy. Only once every year, at the Cardington fair, I used to come down to Morristhorpe in the dark of the evening, and prowl about until I got sight of you ; and sometimes I went into a cottage where I was sure no one knew me, and heard something about you, and so long as you were doing well, I was even content. That was how I happened to be at Morristhorpe last night."

"Oh ! Mother Hagar, you have been very good to me !"

And Opal could not help pressing a close warm kiss on the lips which had told such a story of faithfulness and devotion.

Hagar Winter turned her face away.

"Don't do that, my child. Nobody ever kisses me now. It was my duty to do as I did. No one ever had it to say of Hagar Winter yet that she broke a promise. And if

when I'm laid upon my dying bed you'll only tell me that I've done my duty by you, I shall go content. Mind that, I shall go content.

“Well, I told you I could turn my hand to a good many things; and once I went out, not very long after my first start in London, to nurse a lady who was ill with the fever. They say it's a gift some people have for nursing, and I suppose I have it, for the doctor told me he'd never seen anyone go about her work better, and he offered to me to go and be trained at one of the hospitals where I should get better pay than I could earn at my lace work. So I went for a year, and now I'm on their outdoor staff, and they send me where I'm wanted.

“I believe, though,” Hagar Winter continued, her thin lips curling into a bitter smile, “I was sent for somewhere, a year or two back, where I wasn't wanted, if only they'd known

who I was. I was told to go to a house in Queen Anne Street, to a fever case. Where there's sickness in good houses, they often like a trained nurse, and the wages are very good. I've often thought if I was a young lady I'd take to that sort of thing instead of being a governess. If you nurse a person well again you know you've done some good, but you're not so sure of it the other way. As soon as I went to the bedside I saw my patient was Mark Renneson. He was so ill he didn't know me, but I knew him again directly. When you've loved a man, Opal, as I loved him, you can't forget him—never; let him change as he will, there'll always be something in his face that speaks to you of what he used to be. I was there a week, night and day, for it was a bad case; and I did for him what his poor wife with all her love for him couldn't do, I nursed him from death's door back to life again. The doctor told me I did. Poor body! how she used

to weep and hang over him ! And when he was delirious he used to talk about her and the children, never about me. I suppose I was clean swept out of his memory. I might have killed him if I'd liked, then, very easily ; just missing his medicine now and then, or not giving him the brandy which kept the poor life in him, would have done it ; and I don't know that I should have done worse by him than he did by me more than twenty years before. But it was my duty to nurse people well again, and I did it.

“They never knew me. I was sent to another very bad case as soon as he took a turn for the better, and a younger nurse took my place. And, for as much as I know, they never asked who I was. It's wonderful how soon people forget, who would go down upon their knees to you whilst you can do for them what no one else can. But I heard a good deal about him. His wife, poor thing,

was an innocent confiding sort of little woman, and she told me how her husband had risen in the world, and got on from one situation to another, until now he was an engineer on his own account, undertaking bridges and public works, and those sort of things. And rich, too, I daresay, for she paid me very handsomely, beyond what I had from the hospital. But I never touched a penny of it. I put it all into the donation box of the next hospital I passed. I would not use a farthing that Mark Renneson had earned—no, not to save me from starving.

“I think that’s about all I have to tell you, Opal, of my story. I don’t know but what I ought to be thankful that it’s no worse. I get food and clothing and a comfortable home, and something to lay by every year; for I’m never ill, not in body, and my head’s only been queer once since I came to London. But it’s a cold life, Opal, and

will be right on to the end. There's only one thing warms it, and that's the thought that I'm doing my duty by you, as I promised your poor mother I would. If it hadn't been for the thought that you might some time want a friend, when it came to be known—as I was sure it must be known, sooner or later, whose you were—I could have been content to have sat down by that mere and drifted away amongst the flag-leaves, until my body was as dead as my soul has been for the last more than twenty years. It's a hard thing, Opal, when you've had a look out for just one little moment into the blessed sunshine, to be thrust back into the dark, and be made to live in it all your life; to see your light go down and down and down, and know that it will never rise again—that you must just sit alone in the cold until the end of everything.”

“But the sunshine will come again some

day," said Opal. "If it doesn't come here, it will yonder."

"There is no yonder to me, Opal," said Hagar Winter very quietly. "I just do my duty; no one has it to say of me that I don't do my duty; and that done, I stay content. God may do as he likes with me. I've tried hard to do what is right, and I've never done any wrong to anybody. I've never taken more than I've earned, nor kept back anyone from their own; and if that isn't enough to put me right at the last, it's a pity."

"But if we don't believe right," said Opal timidly. She longed to be able to speak some word of hope and comfort, but she was powerless to do it. Out of her own deep, absolute needs she had never struggled to the light; and the cut-and-dried store of doctrines which Miss Armitage had laboured so diligently to instil into her mind, showed but as the merest candle-glimmering now, in the vast

gloom which wrapped Hagar Winter's life. "Perhaps if we don't believe right, it isn't any use."

"I don't see how any one can believe right, and do wrong, Opal. I never asked myself much about what I believed, so long as I knew I was doing my duty. I'd rather do right and let the rest alone, than have a wonderfully clear notion of what is proper to be believed, and only use it as a cloak to cover the uncleanness beneath. Opal, it seems to me that God looks at things very differently from what we look at them; and He won't deal with us for what we believe, but for what we do. Mark Renneson believes everything that's proper. He's a wonderful support to the church where he 'worships,' as they call it. His wife told me what a very religious man he was, and she seemed to think it was quite a pity the lustre of his example should be taken out of the world, be-

cause she said he put into all the collections, and helped everything that was going, and was quite a burning and a shining light. I daresay he has all his belief mapped out as clear and sharp as a dissected puzzle, and can say his creeds off as easily as I put my thread round these pins ; but I don't think all that will cover the ill he has done to me. Is it any better for me, being what he has made me, that he is a burning and a shining light, as people say, in his church ? He has lived joyfully all the days of his life with the woman that he chose. I have lived lonely all the days of my life with the evil memories that he has left me. Will God take him because he believes right ?—and will he shut me out because I don't believe at all, when it isn't my fault that I can't believe, but his, that killed the heart out of me, and made me the poor dry husk of a woman that I am ? Do your magistrates come down with all the

weight of their laws and punishments on the thief who takes a sovereign out of your pocket, and will God do nothing to the man who takes the gladness out of your life—who robs you of all its hope, and all its sweetness, that he may have the more for himself? Does God let him go through the golden gates that they talk about, into still more hope, and still more sweetness? and am I to be left out in the cold for ever? It isn't much having a God, if that is all the difference He makes."

Hagar said this gravely, quietly, her long thin fingers still working on at the lace-pins, a bitter smile playing over her face.

"Mother Hagar," said Opal, very hesitatingly—Hagar Winter had gone into a region of gloom and darkness, whither she could not follow. In her sheltered life she had had no need of thoughts like these; but she knew whence one, at least, of the awful shadows which darkened her foster-mother's life had

come—"Mother Hagar, you won't be vexed with me for saying one thing?"

"No, child—nothing vexes me now."

"Will you try to forgive that man—I mean Mark Renneson? Won't you try to say the prayer, 'Forgive us our trespasses, for we also forgive those that trespass against us?'"

"No, Opal. I never told a lie in my life, and I won't begin now. My mother said it of me that I was the truthfulest child she'd ever known, and I never did any wrong to anyone. I've always done my duty, I never wasted a life as Mark Renneson has wasted mine, and so I should be forgiving others a great deal more than I want to be forgiven myself. Indeed, I don't feel I have anything to be forgiven for."

"Then won't you be pitiful, Mother Hagar, to those who have?"

"Be quiet, child." Hagar Winter did not say this angrily, but with the coldness of absolute indifference. "I don't bear Mark Renne-

son any malice. When his life was in my hands, I took care of it, and gave it back to him again. I would do the same to-day, and not think I had done more than was my duty to do. But I shall never forgive him—never!”

And with that Hagar Winter went out of the room.

CHAPTER XI.

PRESENTLY there was a knock at the street door. A messenger had come from the hospital for Hagar Winter. She was wanted to go and sit up with some one who was ill.

She soon made her appearance, dressed for going out. She looked as composed as ever. The thoughts which brooded in her heart never wrote their unquiet story on her face. No fever-smitten patient, waking from restless sleep, and seeing that face by his bedside, would be other than calmed by its pallid quietness.

“I’m going out again, Opal,” she said, “and I can’t say when I shall be back again. I’m as bad as a doctor for being out at all hours.

You must just make yourself as comfortable as you can. I'm afraid you won't find much here, though, to keep the time from hanging heavy on your hands."

"Oh! it shall not do that," said Opal, brightly. "You know I don't mean to let you work for me. I shall do something for myself. I have been thinking about it to-day. I learned to draw and paint at Mr. Guildenstern's, and my master told me, if I could study for a year or two in London, I might soon get my living in that way. I should like to enter myself as a pupil in some school of art, if there is one anywhere about; and if I could get to know a few people, I might give lessons by-and-by, or perhaps sell my pictures."

"You won't have to go far, child, for a school, there's one within half an hour's walk, where you could enter yourself, and they give the pupils there orders to copy from the pic-

ture-galleries. The lady that lodges next door has a sister who makes a good deal by copying pictures, and I don't doubt you might soon get into the same way. I remember, now, you were wonderful for a slate and pencil, and used always to be copying things when you ought to have been at your sums. I daresay now, though, the pictures will be of more use to you than the sums."

Before the close of the week, Opal was entered as a pupil in the nearest school of art. The master soon found that her talent was of no mean order; and being a kindly spirited man, and having also a true love for his art, which made him interested in the welfare of those who seemed likely to excel in it, he took great pains with his new pupil; promised, when he knew that she wished to give lessons, to mention her name amongst his friends, and procured her admission to the picture-gallery for the purpose of copying.

His kindness was a great boon to Opal. His encouragement stimulated her to energy, and inspired her with the hopefulness which a nature like hers needed to supplement its lack of self-appreciation. Some of the visitors who came to the school gave her orders for pictures; and within a few months of her arrival in London, her time was fully occupied in teaching, studying, or copying. And though at first she received very little for her pictures, or for the lessons she gave, still that little kept her from feeling herself a burden upon Hagar Winter, and the employment took away her thoughts from brooding over the past.

Sometimes, for many days together, she was left almost entirely alone. Hagar Winter used to be sent to all parts of London by the surgeon of the hospital in which she had been trained, and it was always very uncertain when she returned. Often death cut her

work short, and sent her home again. Oftener still, through days of alternate relapse and recovery, her place was by the bedside of some poor sufferer, whom she at last nursed back to life again, with patient, unwearying care. And these did not always forget her kindly offices. Hagar, or Mrs. Winter as they always called her, had many friends amongst those who thus owed their lives to her skill; friends who felt that no money could repay what she had done for them, and who were glad enough to show by kindness to Opal the gratitude which Hagar Winter did not care to receive in any other way.

By-and-by, as the young girl worked steadily, patiently on, there came into her life the quietness and the strength, and the cheerfulness, which work honestly, reverently done never fails to bring. There was nothing now to jar upon her as in the days gone by. If the glow and glory of youth had faded, long

before their time, out of her life, so also had the strife and the unrest, the pride and the vain defiance of circumstances which used to vex her so. She was learning now to take her share of the burden which all must bear who would win to the rest of content, and to carry it humbly, carry it patiently, whithersoever He who gave it appointed it to be borne. And so doing, she found peace.

There was no bitterness now in the thoughts of those whom she had left behind in the quiet little village of Morristhorpe. She could even think of Amos Durben with the pity which a conquered enemy wins from those who have conquered him by the divine power of forgiveness. He had thought to wound her even unto death. He had but opened a door for her into a newer, better life, a life wherein she had room to work, and room to rest, and room to be thankful. Between the present and the past there was a great gulf fixed.

She could not pass it, nor did she wish. Enough that she was doing her duty, doing it brightly, doing it hopefully. Enough that she was true to herself. She had waited patiently for the dawn, and at last it came ; not with the brightness and the glory of the old time, like glow of sunrise over the hill-tops of youthful promise, but with a steady brightness as of the clear shining after rain.

Only sometimes, in those long, lonely days when Hagar Winter was nursing a fever case in the hospital ward, or keeping death at bay in some splendid home where neither wealth nor luxury nor love could bring what her cold yet dutiful service was winning, Opal, standing at her easel by the window of that quiet little room in Wallace Street, would lean her head upon her hands and think of the days that were no more. Memory drifted back to the old house among the chestnut trees, to the blossom-laden orchard where in spring-time she

and Eulie used to find such store of violets and primroses beneath the snowfall of fluttering leaves that the old trees showered upon them. Spring-time for Eulie of a year into which no chill of winter had ever crept; for herself, of a year whose blossom had fallen and left no fruit behind. Drifted back to the little room with the vine-wreathed window, where in days that seemed now like the days of a dream, so far back had they fallen in the mist of years, she, a little pale-faced, black-haired child, listened to Lancelot's fairy tales, or crept for shelter to his side and nestled her hand into his when Gilbert Lester made the gloom of those autumn evenings awful with stories of ghosts and banshees. Happy days, when she sought no other joy than to be Lancelot's playmate in the meadow by the moat side, to fetch and carry at his bidding, to wait on him with a child's sweet service of unselfish love; and then, when danger came, to be sheltered from it by him, al-

ways safe in that boyish chivalry which would let no evil fall upon her. Happy, happy days, shining far off in the distance like mountain crests which crown themselves with sunshine long after gloom has filled the valley between, and which only lose that glory to win the peace and the stillness of the evening that brings all home.

CHAPTER XII.

WHILST Opal was toiling on bravely and steadily at her painting, sometimes in Hagar Winter's little sitting-room, sometimes in the picture-galleries where she was copying for orders, sometimes in the school of art of which she was the most promising pupil, toiling, too, with more hopefulness, because there was some prospect of her winning the yearly prize which entitled its holder to free study at the Louvre for a year—life was wearing on slowly, monotonously as ever at the old house among the chestnut trees.

Opal was not missed from her home until the day after her departure. Miss Armitage was too busy hearing all that Amos Durben had to

say, to spare a thought for the lofty, defiant young pauper, as she called her, who, with proud step and haughty, uplifted face, had just left the room, for what purpose she neither knew nor cared. Amos Durben stayed at the house until quite late. After he had told Lois Fletcher's story there was his own to tell, the long list of successful mercantile ventures and lucky speculations, which had ended in making him one of the wealthiest men in the colony, able to keep a splendid turn-out of horses, servants, carriages, and all other appurtenances of a gentleman's establishment, not even excepting a wife, upon whom, if she was fair-looking enough to command such a price, he would be willing to settle three hundred a year.

And then he told her how, coming to Cardington on his way to Morrishorpe, he had chanced to see Opal in the menagerie; and being greatly struck by her beauty and noble bearing, had decided to secure her for that

finishing touch which was all his position needed. How, if things could be managed agreeably, all that gold could do should be done towards healing old grievances, and full compensation made to Mr. Guildenstern for the frauds which Captain Darque had practised upon him, and the losses he had sustained through the ill-success of the Penorfa mines. After which, as he appeared somewhat stupefied by the reception which the young lady had given him, Miss Armitage hastened to make matters straight by assuring him that Miss Darque's decision was not by any means to be considered as final. She was a girl of most awkward and determinate spirit, exceedingly difficult to deal with; but she must learn, Miss Armitage said, to bite the bit as others had learned before her; and when she found that she must turn out of house and home, and strive for herself in a world where nobody knew nor cared for her, it not being likely

that Mr. Guildenstern would have her under his roof any longer—indeed, she, Miss Armitage, should take care that was not allowed, even if she had to fight for it; then she would humble herself, and bring her mind to her circumstances, and thankfully accept an offer which was so much superior to anything she had a right to expect. And Miss Armitage said she should herself reason with the girl, and show her the ridiculousness of the airs she was assuming, and set before her the alternative of leaving that house, beggared, penniless, and destitute; or leaving it with a marriage settlement of three hundred a year, the bride of one of the richest men in the colonies. So that, when Mr. Durben called next day to see how things were going on, he would meet with a very different reception—such a reception, in fact, as a man of his means and position had a right to expect.

That was what Miss Armitage said, as Opal and Hagar Winter tracked their lonely way across the fields to Cardington Station; and Amos Durben smoothed his chin, and shrugged his shoulders, and cringed, and fawned, and shuffled in the Chesnut Cottage drawing-room, previous to enjoying his supper of oysters and champagne at the "Red Lion."

Next morning Mr. Guildenstern came back, bringing heavy tidings about the Penorfa mines. The call had to be met immediately. It would more than swallow up the sum which had been set apart for Lancelot's expenses in London. It was impossible now that he could go back to his profession. For another year, at any rate, he must be content to remain at home, doing what he could for himself by teaching or writing. If, after that, things looked up a little, he might go into chambers again; if not, he must just accept

his position, and take to some other means of earning a living.

That was sad news, but before Mr. Guildenstern had time to tell it, Miss Armitage bore down upon him with her still more important story, embellishing it with notes and annotations, not by any means to poor Opal's benefit. Miss Armitage was convinced from the very first that the girl knew who she was. It was impossible that Hagar Winter could have brought her up for eight years without the facts of her parentage having slipped out in some way; and she must have been a designing young hypocrite to have kept them all in the dark as she had done, palming herself off upon them as an orphan, dependent and unprotected. Such deceit! Miss Armitage had not patience to think about it; and all the time knowing that she was the daughter of the man who had ruined them, and blasted poor Lancelot's prospects,

and made him, as it were, a beggar in his own father's village, when he might have occupied a prosperous and successful position in life.

But some people were born hypocrites; it could never be rooted out of them. And Miss Armitage drew herself up, with an air of injured innocence. She had never deceived anyone, she was happy to say. And then, as if it was not enough to have ruined the comfort of her benefactors, Opal must needs spurn the only opportunity which lay within her reach of repairing the mischief her father had wrought. She must needs flout Mr. Durben with her scorn when he offered to take her back to Melbourne as his wife, with a settlement of three hundred a year, and everything paid back again which Mr. Guildenstern's family had lost. It really seemed as if Providence had opened a way of escape to all of them; for, of course, her poor dear

brother-in-law could never think of keeping such a girl under his roof any longer than was absolutely needful; and if Mr. Durben was willing to provide a home for her, she ought to be only too thankful to accept it, and leave the country, as he said, a respectable woman, so far as the re-payment of what her father had robbed could make her respectable.

Mr. Guildenstern listened in silence. He was not a man who said much about anything. That Amos Durben's story was correct, the evidence which he had brought, seemed to prove beyond a doubt. But he was not prepared to go the whole length of his worthy sister-in-law's indignation. He was able, as Miss Armitage was not able, to put selfish considerations out of the question, in judging of wrong doing, and to look at a subject not only as it affected his own interest, but that of others. Opal was suffering for sins in which she had

had no part. Others had made the road for her; now she had to walk in it. She was more to be pitied than blamed; indeed she bore no blame at all, except perhaps for the spirit in which, according to Miss Armitage's statement, she had received the revelation of her father's disgrace. Still, something ought to be done. It was scarcely possible, under present circumstances, that she could remain in the family comfortably. Both for herself and for them, it would be better that a temporary separation should take place. Opal must be talked to kindly, seriously. The whole affair must be considered in the light of a misfortune, not a fault, and some plan devised for her removal, perhaps to his brother-in-law's family at Liverpool, until the excitement and gossip caused by the unwelcome piece of intelligence had passed away. Then she might come back, and things would go on quietly as before.

Miss Armitage had sent the servant to call Opal down to breakfast, but the girl had returned, saying that no one answered. Sulkiness, most likely, Miss Armitage decided. The unthankful creature was ashamed of the exhibition she had made of herself the night before, and properly so. Perhaps it was better she should remain in her own room to meditate upon it. And if fasting helped her to arrive at a more proper state of mind, fast she should until she was humble enough to ask for something to eat. Miss Armitage had no notion of making a fuss over people when they had a fit of the sulks; they were always better left to themselves. If Miss Darque waited for fetching of hers, she should wait long enough.

But Mr. Guildenstern desired a message to be sent to her, and the servant went a second time, returning with the same answer, that she could make no one hear. Then Miss Armitage, with a slight twinge of uneasiness,

went herself. The room was empty. The bed had not been occupied that night. Then she went to Opal's painting room. That too was empty, but a note lay on the mantelpiece, addressed to Mr. Guildenstern.

She brought it to him. This was all it contained :—

“ Dear Mr. Guildenstern,—Miss Armitage will tell you of all that has occurred since yesterday. You have been very kind to me, but I ought not now to accept any longer the kindness of one whom my father wronged so cruelly. Do not be angry with me, for I did not know to whom I belonged, or I should not have trespassed upon your kindness for so many years. I am going away now. I am not afraid. I shall be able to earn my own living somewhere, honestly and quietly. Eulie must not be anxious about me, for I know I shall do well. Give my love to her. Thank you for all your kindness to me.—OPAL DARQUE.”

So then Opal had waited for no decision of theirs. She had taken her future into her own hands. After all, there was something noble and fearless about her farewell—a little of her father's daring, combined with an honourable independence which she had not won from him. It was like the pride of the old Darque people, to brave even want and poverty and starvation, rather than stay where there was no welcome for them. She had gone to make her own way, to seek her own work.

But where? Ay, where? That was the question. For she had given them no clue to her plans. She had gone away alone, unprotected, at a time when thousands of loose people were abroad in Cardington, ready to take advantage of anyone who might fall into their hands. She who had never yet gone into the town, even by daylight, without the protection of a servant or companion, had set off thither or somewhere else, alone in the

dark, taking counsel of no one, asking no one's help. Even now she might be in the hands of some pitiless adventurer, who would turn her helplessness and inexperience to sad account. Even now she might be bitterly repenting the rashness which forced her out from evils which had but to be borne in patience, to others for which there was no remedy.

Mr. Guildenstern, who had a tenderer heart than his sister-in-law, was full of anxiety and fear. He drove off to Cardington station at once, to hear, if possible, some tidings of the missing girl. But the ticket offices had all been so crowded the night before, that the clerks could give him no information. One of the porters fancied he saw a tall young lady, something like Miss Guildenstern, on the south platform, but she was with a respectable-looking woman in widow's weeds, and the place was so crowded that he soon lost sight of her.

Then a Morristhorpe labourer, coming from his work across the fields, had seen two figures in the distance, which looked like women, but he could not say for certain whether they were or not. They were not far from Mr. Guildenstern's meadow gate, and walked very quickly. Finally, old Mrs. Dobbinson, who soon heard of the affair, spoke to the fact of a woman in widow's weeds, a stranger in the place, having come into her cottage the night before, and after sitting to rest for a little while, gone on, as she said, towards the Pondgate toll. But when the Pondgate toll-keeper was asked, he could remember no woman of that description passing on the night in question. And the road there was so quiet that even a foot-traveller could scarcely have gone through unnoticed.

So nothing could be done. There was something hopeful in her letter. She appear-

ed to have a definite object before her, though how she could have matured any plan in the very short time which elapsed between Amos Durben's visit and her own departure, seemed unaccountable. They must just let matters alone, and trust that all would be well.

Whilst Mr. Guildenstern was away, Amos Durben came to receive his final answer, and found that the bird had flown; whither, no one knew. He had not even succeeded in crushing her into submission, or making her own his power. Instead of carrying her back with him in triumph as the price of his gold, or seeing her overwhelmed with shame and humiliation, beseeching from her friends out of pity that shelter which she could no longer ask as a right, she had once more eluded his grasp. The prospect which he had been chuckling over all night was completely swept away. He could neither feast his eyes upon

her distress, nor his malice upon the victory which he had gained.

So the rejected suitor skulked back to Cardington to pay his hotel bill, and prepare for his voyage home.

CHAPTER XIII.

TOWARDS evening Eulie and Lancelot came home, and Miss Armitage had to go through the whole story again. She was rather shocked at what she had done. She knew that those cruel, taunting words of hers had had something to do with the desperation to which poor Opal must have been driven before she could have left the shelter of Mr. Guildenstern's house. And so, to cover her own guilt, she tried to throw the blame upon Opal, when rehearsing the account of the girl's disappearance.

After going through the particulars of Amos Durben's story, she came to the offer which he had made of setting matters straight be-

.

tween Captain Darque and Mr. Guildenstern, if Opal would go back to Australia with him as his wife.

Eulie listened in tearful excitement. Lancelot spoke no word. Fortune seemed to be doing its worst for him just now, but he was too proud to show that he felt its whips and stings. They had both of them heard from old Mr. Lester of Amos Durben's return, and the almost fabulous amount of wealth which he had amassed, owing to his successful speculations in Australia, so that part of the story was not new to them. Only the other part, which belonged to their own home life, touched him so closely that it needed all his self-control to avoid betraying in Miss Armitage's presence how much the hearing of it cost.

"And to think of the proud girl refusing!" said that angry lady, relapsing almost into her former state of excitement as she related the scene which had taken place in the drawing-

room the night before. "To think of her flying out in that style, and saying she would not sell herself to Amos Durben at any price. Such unwomanly boldness, to put it in that way, and when he would have given her a name and a position that she need not have been ashamed of, even if he *was* a poor man to begin with, before he went out to Australia. But the girl is a designing hypocrite."

"Oh, Aunt Armitage!"

"Be quiet, Eulie. I repeat, she is a designing hypocrite; and her behaviour showed what consideration she had for the family who had sheltered her for ten years, not even to be willing, when it was in her power, to make restitution for all the privations her despicable father had brought upon us."

"Not even to marry the man she hated, for our sakes!" said Lancelot coldly. "Very ungrateful, certainly!"

And then he left the room.

Miss Armitage drew herself up indignantly.

“And my own family turning round upon me in this way! I *did* think my nephew would have had more good sense than to say anything in behalf of such a creature. But I know how it is. She has been trying to entrap him too, to get him into her interest—the mean, artful, designing creature! I told her of it, I did, though. I faced her with it, that she had been putting herself in his way, and laying herself out to ensnare him. She knows that she’s found out now.”

“Oh! Aunt Armitage,” pleaded Eulie, weeping pitifully, “how could you be so cruel?”

“Don’t speak a word, Eulie, I request. I know more of the world than you do, and I saw from the very first what she meant. And I told her Lancelot could see through it, and that she need not think we were so blind as not to find out her schemings. And I believe that was the reason she took herself off in

such a manner, because she felt what I had said to be true, and she could not bear to be found out. I told your papa from the very first that he never ought to have had anything to do with her. How could he know who he was bringing into the house in that way, or who she might turn out to be? And to think that, but for her father's villany, we might all of us have been in such a different position, and the family living in your poor dear grand-papa's house, and everything elegant about us, as it used to be before we got drawn in to those horrible mines."

Eulie longed to speak, but her aunt's anger appalled her. She could but weep in submissive silence over the loss of her foster sister. Eulie's grief had no bitterness in it. She had never spoken an unkind word, nor cherished an unkind thought towards Opal, and her sorrow was all for the poor girl who had gone away, they knew not whither, into a world

where there was no one to take care of her. What would she do, and how would she live? Not to be taken care of was Eulie's ideal of misery, and Opal had no one now to do anything for her. But she would come back again. She would surely come back again very soon. Nothing so very terrible had happened that she should leave them so. If it had been Gilbert, instead of Opal, who had turned out to belong to Captain Darque, Eulie knew that it would not have made a bit of difference to her. She should have loved him just the same. And if she herself turned out to be somebody else, she should not on that account dream of Gilbert loving her any less. She should feel that she belonged to him all the same. She could understand Opal being hurt and wounded by those cruel words of Miss Armitage's about her trying to entrap Lancelot ; so much hurt and wounded, that she could scarcely face him again: she should have felt like

that herself if anyone had said such a thing about her and Gilbert. But even that might pass away in time ; and as for the other, about her belonging to the man who had injured them, she was quite sure Opal would soon give over caring about that, and then she would come back to them and all would be right again. So little Eulie dried up her tears, and tried to comfort herself.

When Lancelot quitted the room after that sarcastic speech which had so sorely roused Miss Armitage's indignation, he went into Opal's painting-room. Her colour box, pallet and drawing materials were missing, so also was the picture of Morris-thorpe Grange, together with one or two other studies which she had lately begun. Most likely then she intended to turn to her art as a means of livelihood. She had spoken in that letter to Mr. Guildenstern of earning her own living somewhere, honestly and

quietly. If only she had told them where. It was a noble, daring thing for her to have done. This last act showed that she had the blood of the Darques in her, the old kingly Darques, whose memory shone out fair and bright across the blackness of their later descendants, and whose brave deeds were emblazoned on many a crumbling old scutcheon in Morristhorpe church, beneath the family motto—"I can if I will."

If some of her line had used the brave daring of that motto for unworthy deeds, she had acted out the spirit of it, rashly, maybe, but nobly still; and rather than stay to brook the scorn of those who would fain visit upon her her father's shame, she had gone forth to do battle for herself, to make her own place in the world; and owning neither merit in the bravery of those far off, nor disgrace in the evil deeds of those whose memory was yet fresh, to stand by herself,

with none to help her save God and the resolute courage whose watchword was, "I can if I will."

Lancelot honoured the independence of the woman he had loved and lost. Lost. He knew she would come back to them no more. Such words as Miss Armitage had spoken to her must put a barrier between them which her proud spirit would never seek to overpass. She had been upbraided with deceit, cowardice, artfulness, and no one had been by to shield her from the false accusation. Not one friendly voice had been lifted to soften the bitterness of the words that had driven her forth from her home into the great world, where she was henceforth to strive and struggle alone. If but one of them had been there to stand by her! If, when Amos Durben's pitiless revelation came, she had but had confidence enough in their love to believe that this could make no difference to it. If he had

but said to her the words that were in his heart the day before, when they lingered in the orchard together, neither of them knowing for how long the farewell would be, what a different thing life might have been for them then. What mattered it to him whose she was, or whose name she bore, so long as she trod God's earth a lady in her own right, by virtue of her noble heart and gentle life? What matter if her father had wrought them ill, she knowing not of it, when she was the only woman whose spirit had ever reached out and touched his own, and when she had given him the sweetest he had ever tasted or ever should taste of life's sweetness? But it was too late now.

A heavy cloud seemed to rest upon the house after that, and upon everybody in it, except Miss Armitage, who stoutly defended herself in the part she had taken against Opal. And if in secret she had some qualms of con-

science about the cruel taunting words she had spoken to the young girl, she stifled them by the remembrance of the duty she owed to her poor dear sister's children, and her obligation to shield them from anything which might hinder their advancement in life. And since nothing could more have hindered that advancement than anything bordering upon an engagement between Lancelot and Opal, she felt that she had done as politic a thing as could have been done in preventing it.

Next Sunday morning no one repeated more distinctly than Miss Armitage, the response to that prayer in the Litany, which asks for deliverance from envy, hatred, malice and all uncharitableness.

CHAPTER XIV.

ABOUT a fortnight after Opal's disappearance, Mr. Guildenstern received a letter from her. It bore no address, and was posted from the General Post-office in London. She said she felt it her duty to write to Mr. Guildenstern, to dispel any anxiety which he might feel about her mode of life. She had found a respectable though very simple home, she said, and had the prospect of being able to earn her living honestly. She then thanked him again for his kindness, but added, with a little touch of pride, that she wished no further inquiries made respecting her, as, after Miss Armitage's words, it was impossible for any further communication to be held between them.

That lifted away the cloud of uncertainty, though it could not lift away the cloud of gloom. By-and-by things fell into their usual course. The affair ceased to be talked about in the village. Miss Armitage gave her own version of it to those who made their remarks upon the diminution of Mr. Guildenstern's family. Opal had behaved in a most unseemly manner, she said, when the facts of her parentage became known through means of Amos Durben, and after spurning the offer of marriage which he made to her, and using most insolent and unjustifiable language towards herself, had gone away to London, and was holding a situation of some sort there; though of what sort Miss Armitage really could not say, as, after assuring themselves that the girl had really not fallen into evil hands, they judged it the wisest plan to leave her entirely alone.

That explanation contented the gossips. It

was a painful affair, they said, very painful, but people really never knew what they were doing when they took a child into their family in that way. And as the adopted Miss Guildenstern had shown herself so very independent, and preferred gaining a living for herself to going out as the bride of one of the richest men in Australia, why, perhaps it was as well to leave her to abide by the decision she had made.

Lancelot became morose, moody, irritable. His was a nature that needed much sunshine to ripen it into anything like sweetness. The discipline which opens some hearts, closed his. If he had had anyone to trust in him, he would have been a happier man, perhaps a better man, too; but things all combined to chafe and embitter him now. He could not even work at the work which he had chosen for himself. That last call upon the Penorfa property had cut off the possibility of his re-

sidence in London for at least twelve months to come. All that he could do was to study at home, and look out for some means of keeping himself from being a burden to his father. If Opal had been there, and they had belonged to each other, he would not have cared so much. He could have fought through anything for her sake, knowing that she had faith in him; nay, he could have enjoyed the struggle, for there was that in him which gloried in having something to battle against and overcome. Now there was no one to work for, and there were no difficulties to overcome. Teaching and patience, both things that he hated, were his portion for at least a year, perhaps more, perhaps all his life.

Little Eulie was the only spot of brightness in the house now, and she had no time to be sorrowful, for her wedding was drawing on apace. She was to be married at the end of October. The wedding was fixed earlier than

that, supposing that Lancelot would have to leave for London at the commencement of the month; but the change in his prospects, and Opal's sudden departure, caused it to be put off for a week or two, and now the twenty-ninth of October was the day fixed.

Only two weeks. Gilbert was nearly always at the old house among the chestnut-trees now, and it would not do for Eulie to let the tears be shining in her blue eyes when he looked down into them with such honest, simple, truthful love, love that was to be her shelter and her stay all through life.

All through life. What a sunny path that life had been for her, hitherto!—how sheltered from all that could mar, or ruffle, or bitter it! No harsh touch had ever left a scar upon her gentle little heart—no cloud of sad or evil memories lay upon the fair landscape of her past. Her childhood and her girlhood had been fed by all the love they needed, and,

almost before she had learned to think of a love, closer, tenderer, that also had been given her, and in Gilbert Lester, strong, simple, brave, manly, she found her other self.

There had been no clouds of misunderstanding, either, or mistrust between them, such as must needs arise between more unevenly-balanced natures. All had gone on calmly, happily, until now the two lives, that had run together from childhood, were to be made one in love's fair completeness, her gentleness sheltered by his strength, his sturdy, outspoken straightforwardness toned down and softened by her meek womanly influence.

So, whilst yet the red leaves lingered on the topmost boughs of the orchard trees, and flowers enough were left to strew before the footsteps of the bride, Gilbert Lester and Eulie Guildenstern were married. It was a very quiet wedding. Opal's absence seemed to cast a shadow over it. She was to have been one

of the bridesmaids. She had spent many an hour in helping Eulie with her little preparations, and had listened with such loving, ready sympathy to the innocent, happy day-dreams, at which Miss Armitage, who was an admirably practical woman, had only smiled. Yet everyone who saw the wedding said that, though she was so simply dressed, with no sheen of satin or splendour of lace about her, a bonnier bride than Mr. Guildenstern's daughter had never stood before the altar of Morristhorpe parish church, nor a comelier bridegroom given his troth plight there. And if only the wedding could have come from the great house at the other end of the green—that fine old house, from which the Guildenstern maidens had passed, with due pomp and circumstance, for many a generation past, to change their name and estate for others equally honourable—if only the wedding could have come from that house, the older village people said, who had

seen Guildenstern weddings when the fortunes of the family were brighter than now, they should have been quite content. But it was not fine houses, after all, as old Mrs. Dobbinson said, that made happy homes ; and maybe Miss Eulie, bless her ! had had as sweet a life in that cottage amongst the chestnut-trees as though she had been bred in the midst of plenty, in the Morristhorpe doctor's own proper house at the grand end of the green.

Miss Armitage was resplendent in a purple silk, which rustled and bristled with its own dignity and that of its wearer, as she swept up the church aisle, leaning on the arm of her brother from Liverpool. That wedding was a great triumph to her, though she could not consider herself as instrumental in its accomplishment. But she had had the ordering of the ceremony, and the arranging of the guests, and the choosing of the dresses, and the appointment of the bridesmaids, chief of whom,

of course, was Miss Luxmore, who conducted herself during the ceremony with a becoming air of patronage, and quite eclipsed the modest little bride by her dignity and self-possession.

Miss Armitage had great hopes from that wedding too, and the gaieties attendant upon it; though, in consequence of her poor dear brother-in-law's late losses, the gaieties were obliged to be on a very limited scale. She quite expected it would bring to a successful issue the plans and purposes which she had been cherishing for her nephew's benefit. And now that Opal was fairly out of the way, and no one knew where she was, or what had become of her, nothing stood between Lancelot and Miss Luxmore's ten thousand pounds, except his foolish backwardness, and that pride—proper pride, she must admit, though carried in this case to too great an extent—which made him shrink from laying claim to them. Lancelot was so terribly proud; and

since that last unlucky affair about the Penorfa mines, she had had the utmost difficulty in preventing him from entirely cutting Miss Luxmore's acquaintance. Sensitiveness—nothing but sensitiveness, of course, which, under the circumstances, was perhaps reasonable, only she had taken care that Miss Luxmore should know nothing about the circumstances, and should not, either, until things had been brought to an understanding between them. His remaining at home for the next twelvemonths could easily be explained on the ground of ill-health—he certainly had gone off wonderfully during the last week or two—and it was no use damaging his chances of success by telling her how very uncertain his professional prospects were at present. He would succeed in the end. He was sure to succeed in the end. It was only a matter of time, nothing more; and if this temporary disappointment could be tided over, as apparently

of no importance, taken easily, pleasantly, as though more a thing of choice than necessity, all would be well.

Certainly Miss Armitage thought, so far as Miss Luxmore was concerned, everything seemed to promise fairly enough. She was so very ready to fall into any little arrangement which might bring her and Lancelot together—had been so ready to accept his escort to the concert, which indeed might almost be looked at in the light of a public recognition of the position she was ready to accord him—had become so very intimate with Eulie, dropping in at almost any hour of the day, and bringing her work with her, as though quite one of themselves, that Miss Armitage was persuaded the time had come now when Lancelot might without danger venture his hopes in that direction, and secure to himself the prize which would set him fairly afloat in life. And now that dear Eulie was disposed of,

and she left desolate as she might say, so far as female companionship went, it would be the most natural thing in the world for Miss Luxmore frequently to come over to the Cottage, having been Eulie's most intimate friend, and a most valuable support to the dear child during the ceremony. So that Lancelot might easily have an opportunity of saying what he wished to say, and what she was quite sure Miss Luxmore, from her general blandness of deportment in the young man's presence, was quite prepared to hear.

Gilbert and Eulie went to the southern coast for their wedding trip, and then settled down to home life at Morristhorpe Mere Farm. Lancelot stayed at home, to study quietly, as his aunt said, and recruit his health, which had suffered considerably from the too severe application of the last twelvemonths. Miss Luxmore, after paying a very affectionate farewell call to her dear friends at Chesnut Cottage,

and telling them how sorry she was to go away and leave them just when the intimacy had become so charmingly pleasant, went to Edinburgh to spend a month with some relatives there, expecting to return about Christmas, when, as she said to Miss Armitage in Lancelot's presence, it would be so delightful to have a great many more dear quiet little evenings together. There was nothing she enjoyed so much as a dear quiet little evening at Chesnut Cottage.

She did return about Christmas-tide—returned not alone, but accompanied by a handsome young Caledonian, whose devotion, both in private and public, abundantly explained the object of his visit so far across the border.

In fact, Miss Luxmore had come home engaged.

Poor Miss Armitage! It was a dark day for her when Mr. Russell's niece came in for a "nice quiet little evening," not long after

young Mr. Macturpin's departure, and told her dear friend, in the strictest confidence of course, but without the slightest pretence of embarrassment or blushing, or any nonsense of that sort, that she was to be married in April. Mr. Macturpin had pressed for an early day, and as she hated long engagements, she thought she might as well yield and have done with it. And would dear Miss Armitage be so kind as to drive over with her some day to Cardington, and look over a few things at the jewellers' and drapers' shops there? She should purchase most of her things in London, of course; a London outfit was always so very superior to anything that could be got up in the provinces; but still it was only right to patronise the Cardington tradespeople a little, as Uncle Septimus had made a good deal of money in the place. And so, if dear Miss Armitage *would* be so kind as to take pity on her, and just

help her to look over a few little things——

Of course Miss Armitage said she should be delighted to take pity upon her. Nothing gave her so much pleasure as to be of use to her friends. And she also begged to offer Miss Luxmore her most hearty congratulations. It always interested her so to hear of young people being suitably settled. She hoped that the change would be in every respect for her advantage, and that she would find Edinburgh a charming residence, &c., &c., &c.

Miss Armitage was far too much a woman of the world to let Miss Luxmore see the stab she had received, and Miss Luxmore was far too much a girl of the world to let Miss Armitage see that she knew what that estimable lady had been aiming at for the last few months, or that she felt the slightest sensation of triumph in having done better for herself than Lancelot's aunt wished to do for her. She accepted the congratulations as cheerfully

as they were offered, took them for what they were worth, and then departed, leaving Miss Armitage to chew the cud of reflection at leisure.

So that little plan came to nothing.

The cloud that crept over the Cottage on the green when Opal left it, never quite passed away. Eulie's marriage took out the little brightness that was left. Mr. Guildenstern's losses and disappointments, the struggle, which every day became harder and harder, to keep up a respectable appearance in society, whilst meeting from time to time the demands upon him from his unfortunate speculations—the emptying of his home, as first Opal and then Eulie left it, the damping of his hopes for Lancelot's success and prosperity—all combined to render him at last a silent, unhappy man. Lancelot grew every day more restless and ill at ease. The genteel village gossips, who felt themselves obliged to find out a reason for everything,

said it was vexation on Miss Luxmore's account. He had evidently intended to make an attempt in that direction, and nothing hurt a young man's pride so much as failure in his love affairs. Others said it was the marring of his prospects which had chafed him. It was an irritation and an annoyance to him to have to spend his time at home, giving private lessons in Morristhorpe and Cardington, when he ought to have been following his profession, and making himself a good position in the best society of London. But whatever might be the cause, all agreed that Lancelot Guildenstern at five-and-twenty, was not like the same young man who, twelve months before, had come to his father's house so full of energy and hopefulness and promise.

Miss Armitage felt that she had been at the root of the mischief. And she felt that though Mr. Guildenstern and his son never reproached her for what she had done, they knew it, too.

And this consciousness spoiled the friendly feeling which had hitherto subsisted between them. Whilst preserving an outwardly courteous demeanour towards each other, all the confidence of home life gradually dropped away. Each appeared not to be conscious of the change, but all felt it in the forced reserve of those long evenings, which, when Opal was at home, used to be so pleasant. Eulie's visits brought sunshine with them whilst they lasted. She formed a centre in which they could all meet. Her loving, gentle influence bound them together when she was with them; but when she was gone, the old coldness and silence crept back. The lighting of that home now, was all from without. There was no longer any fireside warmth within it to ray out and keep those who dwelt around it, safe and comforted and happy.

Miss Armitage knew why it was. She knew that Mr. Guildenstern was mourning for the

child who had gone from them, they knew not whither; who might even now be starving in some solitary chamber, whilst they, full-fed and clothed, could reach out no helping hand to her. She knew now that the joy of Lancelot's life had gone out when she drove Opal forth with those cruel stinging words; that no future, even of success and fame, could give back what she had taken from him when that main-spring of hope and effort was broken. And as the weeks and months rolled on, each deepening the shadow which lay upon the once so pleasant home, and as all that she had planned and schemed for fell away, and her visions of power and rule and influence in that house faded into the dim reality of a merely tolerated presence, Miss Armitage wished, in the bitterness of her spirit, that she could recall the past. She wished she could have been content to let Providence do its own work in its own way. Nay, she could have prayed Opal with

tears and entreaties to return, and bring back the sunshine which her own unkindness had so sadly forced away from the desolate and unlighted home.

CHAPTER XV.

BUT Miss Armitage's wishes and regrets could never bring Opal back to the home which so much needed brightening touch of hers. She was working bravely, steadily on in those quiet little London lodgings, under Hagar Winter's care; winning in that work, if not all the sunny brightness of hope fulfilled, at least the content, and sober, even-tinted peace, which earnest working, of whatever kind it be, never fails to bring. The old house among the chestnut-trees on Morrithorpe village green, the names of those whose kindness had cheered her, or whose ungentleness had vexed her there, were seldom mentioned now. Only, by the very silence which brooded over

them, did Hagar Winter, with the true, unerring instinct of a heart which had also learned to suffer and be still, know how faithfully the life once lived there was cherished even yet.

Neither did Hagar Winter ever go back again to that dreary story which Opal had won from her on the first night of their arrival in London. After that brief, vivid glance, revealing as in a lightning flash all the blasted desolation of her past life, no word was spoken of it any more. Mark Renneson's name was left alone between them. The woman whom he had so deeply wronged, suffered no blame to be laid upon him, nor did she ask from others, in her loneliness and in her suffering, any help of theirs. Whatever faults Hagar Winter had, hers was certainly not the fault of overtaxing the sympathy of those about her. What she had to bear she bore quietly.

But the memory of it ate into her life, as the memory of an unforgiven wrong will ever do.

She bore him no malice. She would have done him no ill. Out of that stern, proud sense of duty, which was the ruling force of her life, she would even again, as she had once before done, have spent her own strength to save him from suffering, and from death. But she could not forgive him. The sweet dew of blessing which heaven pours into the wounded yet lowly soul, never fell for comfort or for healing upon hers. He had wronged her very much, but instead of burying that wrong, and planting the flowers of forgiveness on its grave, she kept her dead in her sight, until its noisome presence brought the plague into her life, and death of all brightness into her soul. She had only one link to the present left now—her love for Opal Darque—a love which yet she never suffered to break forth into any tender word or caress for the girl whose heart sometimes grew sad for want of them. That proud sense of duty done, of a promise faithfully kept—that

one little spark of human, though unspoken love, glowing amongst the ashes of her poor dead hopes—alone preserved her from that death in life, so much sadder than any death which only frees the soul to a better home. Whilst Opal needed care that she could give, Hagar Winter never sought for any other tie to bind her to her round of patient labour. When the time came that such care was needed no longer—when that deep, intense devotion of hers had no longer any object to spend itself upon, then the poor, lonely, unforgiving woman would pray for death, as she had never yet prayed for earthly boon.

Opal was working very hard at the school of art, hoping to win the gold medal which should supply her with the means of six months' residence in Paris, with free study in one of the academies of painting there, and access to the Louvre for copying. With the added power and experience which that

six months of close hard working would give, she hoped to do well when she returned to London. She should then have a safer consciousness of her own merit, of her right to take a good place in her profession. What her still almost morbid self-distrust kept her from claiming, that gold medal, the highest honour the school of art could give, might help her to attain—confidence in her own power, and boldness to ask for it a fair, honest recognition.

Then, perhaps, after years of labour, she might be able to wipe out some portion of the stain from her dishonoured name; to use it, not blushing for its evil memories; to repay at least a little of that which, by no fault of hers, had been taken from those who were once so kind to her. Also, she would be able to shelter her foster-mother from the need of continual toil, and make a home for her, where the evening of her days might be spent in peace.

For Hagar Winter's strength was failing. The strain of those long lonely years in London, whose only gleam of brightness was a visit to Cardington and a chance sight of Opal, stolen through the gloom of autumn evenings, as she lurked in the shadow of the old house among the chestnut trees, had been almost too much for her. It was a toil in which no kindly hand had helped her; and when evening by evening saw its close, there had been none to speak a word of comfort, none to cheer her by telling her that what she gave so faithfully was cared for. Her sole companion had been that dark cloud of unforgiven wrong, that grim, unburied corpse, whose dead face looked so awfully upon her.

"You know, Mother Hagar," said Opal, as one night they sat in the scantily-furnished little room, talking over plans for the future—"you know that six months in Paris will

do so much for me, and if I do manage to win the French medal too, I shall be able to keep us both when I come back again. You've had a hard day's work, Mother Hagar, but then you needn't work any more at all, and won't that be grand?"

Not a smile rippled over Hagar Winter's grave, still face as she went on sewing the lace sprigs to a veil which was to be worn next week by the bride of a young nobleman at the west-end.

"Yes, child, you are right. I *have* done a hard day's work in my time, but I don't want for rest. There's never been any rest for me this long time past, but just keeping on doing something, and it's all I shall ever have. I should be only vexed with any other rest now, if it ever came about that I got it."

"But, Mother Hagar, it would be such a joy to me if I could win you a little bit of

quietness here, before you go to your long holiday up yonder."

"I don't know about any long holiday up yonder, child. It's little holiday I've ever had from handwork, or the other sort that's worse than that. I only want to be let alone when I've done all that there is for me to do. If you'll tell me, Opal, when it comes to the last with me, that I've done my duty by you, I shall go content, whatever it is that I have to go to. Mind that, Opal, I shall go content. It's the only comfort I've ever had in this world, to know that I've done my duty, and it'll go hard if, when all that is done with, I'm not right for what's to come."

"You've been very good to me, Mother Hagar."

Opal would fain have laid her hand for one soft caressing touch on those thin fingers that worked so ceaselessly on with

the regularity of a machine; but something in Hagar Winter's face kept her from it.

"I don't know about goodness, child, but I've tried to do what's right. I never did any wrong to anybody, and that's more than many can say; ay more than some can say who think they've taken their ticket safe for glory, and expect to get a shining robe and a crown, and all the rest of it that people talk about. I don't want a crown, and I don't want a robe, and I don't want any of their harps, for I've forgotten how to sing, a long time ago; I only want to be quiet, and I should think God will be good enough to see to it that I'm let alone."

"And yet, Mother Hagar——"

"I know what you mean, child. You're thinking about your mother's prayer-book, and you're wanting me to say something that's in it. There's that between you and me, Opal, I don't know what it is, but I almost know your thoughts before ever you speak them.

But I shan't say that prayer. I never told a lie in my life, and I'm not going to ask the Almighty to do for me what I'm not willing to do for other people, even if I had anything to be forgiven for. And now, child, give over. You mean it all right, I daresay, but you don't know what life is, nor what some people have to suffer in it, and you'll never make me think differently about these things. I should like to see you in a better place than this, though, and with better things about you, such as you've been accustomed to, and so I hope you'll get that medal."

"Yes, I do hope I shall. There's only one thing I don't like about it. I shall have to leave you for so long if I go to Paris."

"Leave me? You'll not leave me, child. At least I shall not leave you. Do you think I should be keeping my promise to your mother if I let you go there alone, with no one to be a stay and shelter to you? No; I've been think-

ing it all over. I've got a few pounds in the bank, for I told you I'd laid by a little every year, thinking it might come in useful for you some time; and I daresay I can sell my lace there for as good a price as I get here, and the doctors of the hospital will give me certificates and recommendations, so that I may perhaps get something to do amongst the people. And I know a little bit of French too, for I once went with your mother to Paris before she was married, and I've happened on one or two maids in families where I've gone to nurse that belonged the country. You know great people think a deal about having a French maid. No, child, we won't be parted, come what will, unless you speak the first word for it; and then I shall have nothing more to say."

"I shall never do that, Mother Hagar," said Opal, smiling into the sad face that looked so earnestly upon her. And then she went away to her work at the school of art.

CHAPTER XVI.

OPAL did win the gold medal; and, two years from the day in which she and Hagar Winter had arrived in London, they went together to Paris, that she might study there.

Hagar remembered sufficient of the place to find her way to a couple of cheap, respectable rooms in a quiet part of the city; and there, whilst Opal attended her classes and painted at the Louvre, she busied herself with her former occupation of lace-making. Before they had been very long in the place, she obtained occasional work in nursing. She found out the English residents, went to the different hospitals, showed her recommendations and certificates of merit and tes-

timonials which she had received from different families in England. When Hagar Winter had a purpose, she could display as much energy as anyone in the accomplishment of it, and her purpose now was to earn money enough to keep them during the time of their stay in Paris, so that Opal, instead of being obliged to give lessons, might employ the whole of her time in studying and copying. If she succeeded in this, they might stay long enough, even after the six months of free study had expired, for Opal to gain the silver medal of the Academy, which would give her access to some of the great schools of painting in Italy; or at any rate obtain such certificates of merit as would recommend her to the notice of any artist, English or foreign, to whom she showed them.

She soon obtained employment as English nurse in one of the great hospitals. The surgeons recommended her to their more wealthy

private patients; the sisters of mercy, who frequently came to the hospital, took her with them sometimes on their rounds amongst the sick and poor; and soon the spare, neatly clad figure, and grave, still face of Hagar Winter was a welcome sight, both in the comfortable homes of the English residents, and the poverty-stricken chambers where want and suffering crept out of notice.

The months passed on very quietly for Opal, who spent every available hour of daylight at her work, and as much as she could spare from needful rest in the study of books connected with her profession. Her love for art was fast growing into that passion which alone can bring success. She knew no time, and she felt no weariness, as she sat amongst those glorious old paintings at the Louvre, or studied from the splendid models which the Academy supplied. Even the longing to work herself free from the stain which rested on her fa-

ther's name, was almost lost at times in that other, more earnest ambition to be able to tell out, as the old masters had told out, the truth that was within them; to give shape and perfection and lastingness to her own thoughts, as they had done to those of beauty and sublimity which stirred and brooded within their souls.

Here at last she found what to natures like her own, strong, sensitive, aspiring, is essential to their wholesome development; something in which she could entirely live herself out, without coming into personal contact with those whom nevertheless she so powerfully impressed. She felt within her thoughts which she could not speak; for speech with her was ever a poor, imperfect rendering of the life which she sought to reveal; moreover it forced her into the presence of others, and brought her under the influence of that shyness and mistrust which had always cramped the true expression of her soul. Had speech been her

only outlet, Opal must for ever have remained amongst the silent ones; for what was best in her, purest, noblest, was restrained by the very fineness and susceptibility of her nature from developing itself.

But now she had found a new language. In it she could say what had never found words before. Her life was no longer pent up, turned in upon itself. By her paintings, as some by their written, and others by their spoken words, she could make herself known to those from whom hitherto want of speech had shut her out. Her whole being seemed to brighten and kindle under the impetus which had thus been given to it. She was no longer the mute, unintelligible Opal of those early days, struggling to give what none could understand. She had found a voice for her thoughts, and that voice had brought her into companionship with the whole world. It was as though a new life had been opened to her. She could

never again be alone as she had once been alone in those years past, when all thoughts of beauty and passion, and longing, and tenderness, had to be kept to herself alone.

After the time allowed by the London certificates had expired, she still remained in Paris, studying at the Academy on her own account, in order to win the medal which would give her the means of going into Italy. That was the great idea of her life, to spend two or three years in Rome, and then come home to take, if not a noble, at least a fair name amongst the female artists of her own country.

She should feel then that the future was in her own hands. With the knowledge thus gained, she did not fear being able to make her way in a world where she had none to look to for help or protection, a world in which she must stand alone, sustained only by trust in God and in herself, and the motto of her ancestors—" *I can if I will.*"

Hagar Winter's time was now almost entirely employed in nursing, sometimes amongst the wealthy families of the city, sometimes in the miserable attics of the very poor, to whom she went, in company with the French sisters of mercy. It was whilst accompanying a sister on one of these latter missions, for which Hagar Winter would never take any reward, that a Frenchwoman, who let out her house in rooms to the more decent of the poorer classes, passing her upon the stair, asked her to come in and see a man who was dying in one of the upper chambers. The woman judged of her vocation by the dress she wore, and knowing her by her accent to be English, pressed the claim of her lodger by representing that he was a countryman, with no relatives, and not even a friend to do for him the last offices of kindness.

The woman said that she was on her way now to seek for a priest, for he seemed anxious

to confess, and receive absolution ; but if Hagar Winter would go back with her, she would take her into his room first, and leave her there to do what she could for him.

Hagar accompanied her. The man was lying on a little bed in the corner of the room. Everything about him told of poverty—worse than poverty—of the vice through which that poverty had been brought. A dirty pack of cards lay on the chair beside him. Fumes of ardent spirits lingered in the close, unwholesome air of the room. As Hagar lifted up the ragged overcoat which he had dragged round him to keep him from the cold, she heard the rattle of dice in it. And if these things had not told their own story, his face supplied what they left untold. It still retained the ghastly remains of reckless gaiety. His words, even when he spoke to the grave, quiet sister of mercy, who had come to watch and tend him, had the coarse freedom which befitted a gin

palace or smoking saloon. Yet his accent was not rude, nor his appearance that of the rough, uncultured boor, who has herded all his life with those of his own kind. There was something which might almost have been called gentlemanly in the contour of his features, had not the expression acquired during a lifetime of sinfulness blurred and defaced it. Doubtless he had been gently brought up, like many another whose misspent life and hopeless death seem a strange answer to the agony of prayer which some poor, heart-broken wife or mother has poured out for them.

Hagar Winter smoothed his pillow, fetched water to sponge his hands and face, gave him food and cordial from the bag which she always carried about with her when she went amongst the poor. Then she began to set the room in order. He let her do it without a word of thanks, only following her with his eyes as she glided noiselessly, like a shadow,

to and fro, gradually imparting to everything about her her own aspect of neatness and quietness. She was still thus engaged when the woman of the house returned, bringing with her the priest, a brisk, dapper, pleasant-looking little man. He took her for one of the sisters of charity with whom he so frequently came in contact during his visits to the poor, and after returning her silent salutation, paid no more heed to her presence. He began to ask a few questions of the sick man who had desired to confess to him. Hagar Winter stood apart, by the casement, that she might not disturb them. Once or twice, as the man told his story, she turned round upon him with a quick, inquiring look, but she never spoke a word. And when the priest began to prepare for receiving his confession, she left the room to go to the woman of the house, who was quite prepared to enter into particulars respecting the case.

She said the man had been there about six months. He came from a more respectable part of the town, in which she imagined he could not afford to live any longer. When first he took her lodgings, he appeared to be tolerably well off, and had rented an apartment below, larger and much more convenient than his present miserable chamber; but a few weeks before he had been obliged to give it up, not being able to pay for it any longer. She did not think he had any means of getting a living, as he seemed to come in and out at all times of the day, without any sort of certainty. He had always contrived to pay his rent regularly, though, until the last few weeks, when he had sold first one article of furniture and then another, until now the room was almost bare. People used often to come to see him, she said, when he lived in the large room below, but since he had got into the attic they had left him

very much to himself. He had been confined to his bed a week or two with this fever, which seemed likely to be the death of him; and how she was to be paid for her arrears of rent, and for the food which she had sometimes bought for him, was more than she could tell. He seemed to care for nothing now but his letters, which were always left for him at the Poste Restante. As long as he could crawl out of the house to fetch them, he used to do so himself, but now she went for him every day. However, she did not think she should go much longer, for nothing ever came, and if he was so near death it was not much consequence.

Hagar Winter went away, and came back presently with a change of linen which she had brought for him. When she had put it on, she brought him warm food from the hospital, and fed him like a child. Then putting a couple of francs into the woman's

hand, she said that she should come again that night or the next morning; and so returned to her lodgings.

Opal was there. She had just come in from the Academy, and was writing down some notes of the master's instructions. She usually spent her evenings either in doing that, or reading the books which were supplied to the students from the Academy library. Hagar Winter went close up to her, and with no change in look or voice from her usual manner, said,

“Opal, I have seen your father. He is dying, here in Paris.”

CHAPTER XVII.

AN uncontrollable feeling of horror and aversion was the first which rushed over Opal's mind when Hagar Winter spoke these words. Her father, whose very name was a heritage of infamy; her father, through whose evil deeds her life had been crushed and withered, living in the same town, within reach of her! Her first impulse was to fly from him, to go back to England, to Rome, anywhere, so that hundreds of miles might lie between them, so that she should never need to look upon his face, or be reminded of the mischief and misery he had wrought.

Hagar Winter noticed the look of horror and affright.

"Yes, he is here, child, but he will not be

here long. He has done all the ill that he ever can do. He is dying in a poor upper chamber a mile away from here. Dying alone, with no one to help him or care for him."

Opal sprang up. Deeper than pride, deeper than shame, deeper than her hatred of the wrong he had done, lay that instinct of pity which prompted her to seek out and cherish the man, who, if he had given her all the bitterness of her life, had also given her its power to do and dare and conquer. And if he had had no other claim upon what she could give to him, this one could never have spoken in vain, that he was the man whom her mother had loved even unto death.

"Mother Hagar, let us go to him!"

"Yes, child, to-morrow."

"No, Mother Hagar, to-day—to-day! It may be too late to-morrow. Let me go and be a daughter to him!"

“Well, child, as you like. Do what you think it is your duty to do. I shall never try to keep you back from that. It is a fever, you know, and a bad one too; but as for that, you will die when your time comes, and not before. If you are minded to go to-night, you shall wait until I have prepared some food for him, and then we will both of us go.”

Hagar got ready what was needful, and then they both set out together, through the brilliantly lighted streets, thronged now with thousands of gaily-dressed people, who had turned out to witness the illuminations in honour of an Imperial birthday. No one took any notice of them. It was a common sight to see a sister of mercy in hood and cloak of grey, such as Hagar Winter wore, wending her way through the gay crowd, accompanied by some young girl who was learning from her how to wait upon the sick.

It was quite late when they reached the chamber where the sick man lay. A small lamp which Pauline, the landlady, had placed upon a table beside a crucifix at the foot of the bed, cast its feeble glimmer over his face. The room looked more comfortable now, for Hagar Winter's touch yet lingered upon it. She had hired from the landlady fresh linen for the bed, and a clean coverlet for it, and bidden her kindle a fire in the stove; so that Opal's first impression as she entered the room, was not of that squalid misery which had met Hagar's gaze when Pauline brought her into it a few hours before.

The sick man knew her again as she came up to him, and gave him the cordial which she had been preparing.

"You are very good to me," he said, feebly. "It is a long time since anyone cared for me."

"I am glad to do it for you," she replied.

"It is my work here to care for those who have no one else to care for them. I am accustomed to it."

She spoke in English.

His face brightened as he heard his mother-tongue again.

"You know English?" she said.

"Yes."

And then an unquiet look came over his face, as he watched her moving about him, and arranging his pillows.

"Leave me," he said.

"No. I shall not leave you." And Hagar Winter gazed steadfastly down upon him.

"You know me."

"Leave me."

"No. And I have brought some one to see you, whom you know."

There was a feeble flash of defiance in his eyes, as he turned them upon her now, and said in a voice broken with excitement and

anger, but as loud as his failing strength would permit,

“Who knows me? Are you a spy? I don’t owe you anything. I didn’t rob you. I don’t care, it’s too late now. They may catch me if they like. It won’t be for long.”

Hagar beckoned to Opal, who came tremblingly forward.

“Captain Darque, this is your daughter, Opal. You remember you once had a daughter Opal.”

Taking the girl by the hand, Hagar led her to the bed-side, and the father and the child looked upon each other face to face ; she whose life had been so cruelly wounded by guilt of his, who had borne, first in the sadness and loneliness of her childhood, and then in the scornful anger which had driven her forth into the world to toil and labour there, the curse of his own wrong doing.

“Ah! yes,” he said hopelessly; but there

was no defiance in his look now, only shame and penitence. "I had a daughter once. You have come to reproach me. You might have let me die in peace."

Opal stooped over him and pressed a kiss upon the death-damp face, whose only signet for many and many a year gone by had been the brand of sin, burning itself deeper and deeper down.

"Father, I have no reproaches for you. I have come to take care of you, to be a daughter to you."

"To be a *daughter* to me," repeated the dying man,—"*to be a daughter to me.*"

And then he turned his face to the wall, and tears began to trickle slowly down his hollow cheeks. They were the first he had ever shed for guilt of his. Perhaps in their bitterness and in their shame they might be to him as a baptism through which he should pass, not to pardon, but to the child-like penitence which seeks it.

Hagar and Opal staid with him all that night; Opal tending him, not, alas! with that reverence which a daughter would fain give to him whose love has been her shelter and her stay, but with only the pitying tenderness which sorrow wins from those upon whom it has no other claim than the common kinship of humanity. Through him had come to her the sharpest stings she had ever known. Out of his guilt had grown the loneliness and desolation, which, cramping her childish life, had left upon it a scar no after joy could wear away. And in return for this she came to give him the care which should have been her own due; to offer him, out of her womanly pity and forgiveness, that which she could never offer from gratitude or love; to put its last faint gleam of warmth and comfort into a life out of which her own had only received its bitterest dole of pain.

He seemed too conscience-stricken to take

much heed of her. With feeble, trembling hands he tried to put away those which would have ministered to his needs; and turned his face from that which, full of tearful tenderness, bent over him. There still lingered in him enough of humanness to weep over his own disgrace. That lowest deep of all he had not yet reached, to be unconscious of his fall. And whilst those tears could flow there was hope that the poor sick soul whose needs had wrung them out, might struggle upwards to the light again.

So the night wore on, the strangest but not the saddest night Opal had ever known. For as she sat by the dying man and whispered sometimes to him such words as might guide the suffering, struggling spirit to the rest it so much needed, there gathered round her a new, sweet sense of peace, the divine peace of charity and forgiveness, the peace which poor Hagar Winter, in all

her sad and dreary life, had neither sought nor found.

Towards morning he revived a little. As Pauline entered the room to relieve Hagar Winter and Opal in their attendance, he looked eagerly, hungrily at her. Opal thought he needed food, and was bringing some. He put it from him, still looking anxiously towards the landlady; but he had not strength to speak.

“It is not that, Mademoiselle,” said Pauline. “He does not want that. It is the letter. Every morning for the last three weeks has he asked me that question about the letter. Poor soul! it is something that troubles him. If Mademoiselle will watch one little half hour longer I will go out and fetch it, if it has come. You are learning, then, of your charity to nurse the sick, Mademoiselle?”

“Yes,” said Opal. “It is what a woman should always learn to do.”

“It is, Mademoiselle; and you cannot have a better teacher than this good sister,”—Pauline curtsied to Hagar Winter—“whom I asked yesterday to visit my poor man. Ah! it was beautiful to see how she did minister to him. I have the willingness, Mademoiselle; but, you see, one cannot always do what one would. But he looks at me again with that beseeching look. I will even go and see if there is a letter for him this morning.”

She went, but returned empty-handed. A look of utter weariness and disappointment came over the sick man's face.

“To-morrow, Monsieur, to-morrow,” said Pauline briskly. “Monsieur must wait. Perhaps it will come to-morrow.”

And then she hastened to put more wood on the stove and dust the room, for the visit of the sister of charity had made her take much more interest in her sick lodger.

Hagar Winter and Opal ministered to him

by turns all that day and the next, little change taking place in him, except that now and then he revived slightly and tried to talk to them. Once he bade Opal take out a dirty-looking writing folio from the trunk at his bedside, and search in it for a letter which he said she would find. It was a circular from the directors of the Penorfa mines, to the effect that the prospects of the company were brightening, that ore had been struck at last, and that if it turned out to be a good vein, a dividend would soon be paid to the shareholders. The circular was dated three months back, and a postscript stated that an early announcement would be made to the shareholders of the success or failure of the works which had been begun again.

“Bad concern,” he whispered—“ruined—us all. Better by-and-by. Rich woman yet.”

And then he fell back, utterly spent and

exhausted by the little effort he had made.

They asked him no questions about the past—never sought to learn from him the story of the years wherein he had been a wanderer upon the face of the earth, or to urge him to a revelation of all that he had done to set so deep a stain upon his name. They thought it best, wisest to leave that matter between himself and God, the poor soul making its confession alone to Him. The priest came every day, but only to pray for him; he was too weak now to speak any more. Hagar Winter brought a surgeon, too, from the hospital, and what his skill could do was done to make the rest of the death-journey less painful. But after that first night, when Opal kept watch by her father's bed, there had been little speech between them. The fever was doing its work quietly, darkening the windows through which the soul looked into life, until it could neither seek nor give any further sign. It

looked only deathwards now, not earthwards any more.

On the fourth morning, Pauline brought the long-expected letter. It came too late to waken a gleam of interest in the dying man's face, as he lay there, ghastly, motionless, in the dim grey morning light, whose noon he would never see. Opal read the letter. It was, as she expected, from the agents of the mining company again. The working of the new vein had gone on prosperously. The shares had risen rapidly in value. The directors hoped at their next meeting to be able to declare a handsome dividend, and in the course of time to repay the shareholders for all the losses they had sustained since the concern was commenced.

Opal tried to make her father understand the contents of the letter. A feeble movement of his head seemed to indicate that she had succeeded.

“Father,” she said, “shall your last act be the act of an honest man?”

He turned his glazing eyes upon her. Opal fancied his lips moved, though he could not speak.

“Will you make what restitution you can, father, to those whom you have wronged?”

Again that feeble motion of the head.

“Mother Hagar, fetch a notary.”

“For what, child?”

“For my father to do what is right. Lose no time, or it may be too late.”

Hagar Winter did as she was bidden. There was something in Opal’s face that would take no denial. Presently she brought the notary with his clerk carrying a bag of papers. Opal, with clear, business-like precision, explained to him that the dying man wished to convey to a gentleman in England his interest in the property connected with the Penorfa mines, and requested the notary to prepare a document to that effect. It was done, and putting the pen

in her father's hands, she guided his hand over the signature of the deed, which conveyed to Mr. Guildenstern, of Morristhorpe, his shares in the Penorfa mines, with all profits arising therefrom. Pauline was sent for. She and the clerk signed the document. Then, having received his fee, the notary went away, asking no questions, betraying no surprise. The paper was posted that day to Morristhorpe. If it left Opal a poor woman so far as worldly possessions were concerned, it left her rich in the consciousness of having done what was right, and wiped her hands of gains to which others had a better claim than herself.

At noon the priest came again, but Captain Darque had no need of any words of his. He had gone where neither priest nor sacrament could serve him more, even to the presence of that supreme Judge, who, with wisdom wiser than ours, and love more loving, appoints to every man his own place.

CHAPTER XVIII.

CAPTAIN DARQUE was buried in the strangers' quarter of one of the Paris cemeteries. After his funeral, Opal went back to her studies at the Academy, and Hagar Winter to her usual occupations of lace-making and nursing. They remained in Paris six months longer, until Opal had gained, not the gold medal, for that was only given to French pupils, but certificates of merit which would be sufficient to recommend her to the notice of the English artists resident in Rome; and then, accompanied by her foster-mother, she went there, to pursue her studies with renewed earnestness and ardour in the midst

of those splendid old masterpieces whose very names had been an inspiration to her.

The document which the notary had drawn up under her direction, was forwarded to Mr. Guildenstern on the day of its completion. He had previously heard of the unexpected rise in the Penorfa property, by means of which the shareholders were likely to be more than compensated for all the losses they had sustained, and he began now to entertain hopes that after all Lancelot might be able to give up the tutorship, which was such terrible drudgery to him, and resume the profession to which he had been educated. Even if the dividends promised did not make their appearance for six months after the next half-yearly meeting of the directors, there was at any rate the prospect of brighter days to come, and the drudgery of teaching would be borne more patiently when the certainty of something better lay beyond it.

This second windfall of prosperity, more than doubling the amount of Mr. Guildenstern's property in the Penorfa mines, settled the matter, and Lancelot was told that he might give up his tutorship as soon as a successor could be met with.

"You see," said the doctor to Miss Armitage, for this stroke of good fortune had made things more pleasant at the Cottage, and they could meet over their prosperity as they had never met over their adversity, "you see Captain Darque was not such a villain as we gave him credit for, after all. There must have been a little honesty in the man, though why he should have singled me out as the sole legatee, when so many others were ruined by him at the beginning of the concern, I can't imagine. Besides, if he is dead, as this is his dying will and testament, the property belongs to Opal. I have no right to it."

“No right to it, indeed!” said Miss Armitage, bridling up; prosperity had a wonderfully hardening effect upon Mr. Guildenstern’s sister-in-law—“No right to it! I wonder who should have a right to it if you haven’t, and you as good as ruined all your life long by the roguery of that man. And the beautiful house that your poor dear father used to live in, gone out of the family, and the position lost, and Lancelot’s prospects blighted as they are, for the poor lad has never looked up since that last call upon the mines more than three years ago, and never will, I do believe, let what may come to him now.”

“Ah! that was a great disappointment to Lancelot,” said the doctor. “He’s never got over it.”

“No,” replied Miss Armitage briskly, accepting the doctor’s assent to her proposition with eagerness. She was always glad to seize upon any remark which seemed to in-

dicating that Mr. Guildenstern was ignorant of the real cause of Lancelot's sadly altered life. "He never has and he never will, and therefore there is all the more need that what money *can* do money *should* do to make it up to him. Because, let it be as much as ever it will, it can do very little towards putting things straight after all we have gone through, and the way our position has been lost in the place, and the shifts we have been put to to keep things at all decent as a professional man is obliged to have them. Let the money go to Opal indeed! And pray who is to find out any Opal for it to go to, I should like to know, and the girl flinging herself out from us in that way. Such ingratitude!"

"Opal did not fling herself out from us," said the doctor gravely; "she was flung out."

Miss Armitage saw that she had gone too far. It was never politic to bring up the

actual circumstances of Opal's departure; they told too strongly against herself. So she left that track, and came back to the one before it.

"Well, whatever it was, it was very unfortunate; and I'm sure over and over again I've been sorry that she was of such an independent spirit that it was almost impossible to get along with her. But for anything we know, it may be all over with her now; and I should say that, however it is, you have as good a right to the property as anyone, and better."

"That may be," said Mr. Guildenstern, whose ideas of right and wrong were built on entirely a different foundation from those of his sister-in-law; "but I shall not accept this as a genuine document until I have inquired into the affair, and done what I can towards finding out what induced Captain Darque to have such a will drawn up."

Accordingly Mr. Guildenstern and Lancelot set off to Paris, and repaired to the office of M. Gaverin, the notary through whom Captain Darque's will had been made.

M. Gaverin told them what he knew about the affair; that he had been sent for, a week or two before, to a man who was dying in a humble lodging in one of the low parts of Paris. There, at the dictation of a young lady, apparently the associate of the sister of mercy who had summoned him, he had drawn up this document, in which M. Darque made over to Rupert Guildenstern the whole of his interest and property in the Penorfa mines. After the man had affixed his name to the document, and it had received the signatures of the woman of the house and his clerk as witnesses, he had taken it to his office and communicated with Mr. Guildenstern, whose address the sister of mercy had given him. He then directed Mr.

Guildenstern to the residence of Pauline, M. Darque's landlady; having, as he said, given all the information in his possession.

Pauline could tell them little more. The man had lodged with her, she said, for about six months, living first in one of her better rooms, and then in the upper chamber where M. Gavarin had seen him. He had gradually fallen lower and lower, until he had been obliged to sell his furniture for food, and during his last illness would have been totally destitute, had it not been for the kindness of a sister of mercy, to whom she commended him, and who, with a young lady, had waited upon him and supplied his wants until his death. But she could not give the sister's name, nor that of the young lady who accompanied her, who was evidently preparing for the vocation. They had arranged his funeral and paid his debts, and since that time she had never seen either of

them. It was the sister of mercy who had gone for the notary, not long after the priest had been. Most likely the dying man had been urged to it by his confessor, but she could not say. He often had English letters, but they were always addressed to the Poste Restante. She knew nothing about his previous life. When he was able to get the money he used to drink; and he had a good many loose companions, but they did not come much to see him towards the last.

So Lancelot and his father came back no wiser than they went. After that, Mr. Guildenstern inserted advertisements in the London papers, stating that if the daughter of Captain Darque applied to a certain address she would hear of something to her advantage. But that, too, produced no result. Opal saw the advertisement, guessed to what it referred, and let it alone. So finally Mr.

Guildenstern had no alternative but to accept the good fortune which had been sent him.

In due time Lancelot took up his residence in London again, there to wait, not very anxiously, seeing that he could do either with or without it now, for such success as might come to him. If, with all his fine prospects, he could have gone there bravely, hopefully, happily, as, six years ago, he went, with no probable future but that which his own industry could achieve for him, it would have been well; but that could never be. But he did work, though, and made himself a fair position in his profession. And, as they generally do when people have ceased to care for them, the briefs came in rapidly, and, moreover, he was for the most part successful in carrying his causes; so that Lancelot Guildenstern soon became one of the most rising young barristers on his circuit.

After a year's residence in Rome, Hagar Winter and Opal came back to London. Opal

brought with her certificates of merit from the different academies at which she had studied ; but she also brought back what was a more precious possession even than these—the consciousness of a name free from any dishonour which self-denial of hers could wipe away from it. She had done what she could, and so had her father, to repair the wrongs of the past, and she could remember the friends of her youth now without the stinging thought that guilt of his was straitening and impoverishing their lives.

They settled down again to life in London, dependent on their own resources as before. But Opal was beginning to make herself a name now. She had as much work as she could do in copying from the pictures in the different galleries, chiefly those in the Kensington Museum. She did not go out any more to give lessons, but she took pupils at her own house, who paid her so well, that she was

soon able to remove from the little house in Wallace' Street to handsomely-furnished rooms in the neighbourhood of the Museum, where, had Mother Hagar been so disposed, she might have lived the life of a lady amongst pictures and easels, and palettes, instead of going out as heretofore, on her self-imposed mission of nursing.

But Hagar Winter could not be idle. As she said to Opal long ago, there was no rest for her, except in going about doing something. She knew that she was doing her duty in living with the motherless, though not now dependent girl, who, but for her protection, would be alone in the world; and that thought put all the brightness and all the content into her poor dark life that it was ever likely to know. But she must work too—work to keep the terrible past away; and give, as the price of nightly rest, that daily stint of labour, without which it never came.

siasm—none of that mingled pride and humility, gentleness and defiance, which made her so vexing, yet so fascinating, to Lancelot Guildenstern, when he came to Morristhorpe six years before. Nor had they taken from, but only added to, the beauty which charmed him then. Opal Darque, or Miss Opal, as she was called by her professional acquaintances, that being the name under which Hagar Winter brought her to London first, had become a woman of very noble and queenly presence. She could not but be conscious now of her talent, though she bore the distinction of it with a grave, lofty quietness, which seemed to enhance its lustre, as the pale gold setting of a diamond intensifies the brilliance of its rainbow tints. She knew that she was no commonplace, undowered girl—a unit in the mob of mediocrity. She had her work to do, her mark to leave upon the world. She did not care for popularity, though she might have

taken a fair rank amongst the artists of her own country. Enough for her that through form and colour she could express her thought to the world. That was all she wished, to find an outlet for the life within—to have some point of contact with other minds, through which she could reach and influence them without the medium of actual personal communication. For Opal's sensitiveness and mistrust still held her back from shining in society. Speech was still a poor interpreter of the thoughts that glowed and burned within her. She could only speak them through those forms of grace and beauty, which were to her words, looks, tones, everything.

So, though her presence would have been welcomed now in many a crowded London drawing-room, where her name was spoken with the praises due to a rising artist, she preferred to shut herself out from society,

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and live a very quiet life with Hagar Winter, in the suite of rooms which they occupied near the Kensington Museum. She worked very hard, for her life lay before her yet, and all that was won from it must be won by her own unaided exertions. She had no time to idle, no time to feed upon the honey of flattery. Whilst the cunning right hand and the fertile brain could work together, they must; for out of their labour, and only out of that, could the rest of the far-off future be laid up. She did not look forward, as most women do in the spring-time of their life, to the years when they may sit at ease whilst the strong labour for them; to the beauty, and the peace, and the stillness of a home in which they reign its queen, cherished, cared for, and happy. All *that* lay for her in the past, not in the future, gradually fading away into the dimness of an unfulfilled dream, which, once having gone, could come again no more.

One sad thought which vexed the earlier years of her London life was taken away. The friends who had once cared for her were not suffering now from any wrong which her father had done them. If, by chance, they ever met again—and she knew that Lancelot was in London, for she sometimes read his name—she need not blush to look them in the face; need not blush, either for herself or for him whose name she owned. He had died an honest man, repairing with his last act, so far as it could be repaired, the injury of the past; and she had not needed to purchase, with the lie which Amos Durben would have wrung out of her, freedom from the yoke of enforced dependence.

She never heard from her Morristhorpe friends. She never communicated with them again. She had been too rudely thrust forth from that home ever to enter it again unasked. The days might come—a strange

sense of power within her told her they would come—when the name her friends had once scorned would be spoken in their hearing with praises; and then they might seek her out, and give again what they had rudely taken from her—their respect and confidence. But until then, dearly as she held the memories of that life, faithfully as she cherished the kindness which had been shown her, the love which was the one jewel of the past, she would never, never thrust herself upon them more. She would stay where she had been placed until those who had bidden her from them bade her back again.

She was busy copying one of the most valuable paintings in the Kensington gallery, and wishing to finish it within a stated time, had spent most of her days for a week past in working at it. She had arranged her easel as usual one morning, and was painting so earnestly as scarcely to spare a thought for any-

thing else, when a young lady came into that part of the gallery, leaning upon the arm of a gentleman whose fresh complexion and sturdy breadth of build proclaimed him from the country. His companion too, was noticeably different from the bebies of gaily attired ladies who generally thronged the galleries at that time of the day. Her dress was very good and very plain, not at all to be found fault with on the score of colour, but there was an air of what a fast London belle might have called "dowdiness" about it, and the neat little straw bonnet which shaded her fair modest face was at least a season and a half behind anything in the room. And they both of them looked about with that air of undisguised wonder and delight which town-bred people, or people who assume to know much of town life, are so very careful to repress, lest they should be thought not quite up to the mark. Evidently a

couple from the provinces, as the elegant loungers said one to another; though some of the London belles would gladly have parted with a little of their style for the young lady's exquisite complexion, and the undersized cavaliers who accompanied them would as gladly have appropriated for their own, the gentleman's breadth and height and stalwart proportions.

Opal never noticed them. Indeed she often spent whole days before the picture she was copying, without even seeing one of the hundreds of people who passed and re-passed her, and who with the underbreeding of which even Londoners are sometimes guilty, would now and then stop to pass their remarks upon her work. And as she was particularly anxious to finish this picture before the end of the week, her attention was more than usually drawn away from anything else. Her copy too, happened to be in a corner of the

room, and the light required her to sit with her back to most of the people; so that there was little opportunity for taking notice of the passers-by, even had she been so disposed.

This lady and gentleman paused for some time before a painting not far from Opal, and when at last she moved her position to adjust the easel, the lady looked up into her companion's face.

"Now Gilbert, I told you so."

"Yes," said Gilbert—for it was indeed the owner of Morristhorpe Mere farm, who with his little Eulie had come up for a holiday to the "big village," where they were staying with Lancelot Guildenstern at his Clapton villa. "Yes, I do believe it is."

"And I am quite sure it is. I couldn't be *quite* sure, you know, until I saw her shake her head back in that way, just now, and then I knew directly. Opal always used to shake her head back in that way when she had finished a little

bit, and wanted to see how it looked. But how shall we get to speak to her, Gilbert? I'm sure she wouldn't like it if we went up to her amongst all the people and told her who we were."

"Of course she wouldn't, you little goose. Why, you would want to cry and give her a lot of kisses, and what would the people think?"

"I suppose they would think we were very glad to see each other," said Eulie innocently. "And I *should* be very glad to see her, if I was only sure she would be as glad to see me. But I am wondering, if we don't speak to her, how we shall find out where she lives."

"I don't know either, unless we wait until she goes away, and then follow her to her house."

"Oh! Gilbert, that's as bad as being a policeman. I do wish I dare go and shake hands with her, only she looks ever so much grander than she used to do. I wonder how long she

will sit there before she goes away. Doesn't she look beautiful? But she will never care to come back to Morrishorpe now, I'm afraid."

"Won't she?" said Gilbert, quietly.

For Gilbert was a far-seeing young fellow, though simple and guileless as a child. And he had not been too much blinded by the sunlight of his own courting days to note how things were drifting with Lancelot and the high-spirited, defiant, yet warm-hearted girl, between whom and her foster-brother there used to be such continual sparring.

"We shall see if she won't. Let us sit down for awhile before this landscape of Gainsborough's, and wait until she begins to get ready to go away. I say, Eulie, isn't it just like a little bit of Morrishorpe?"

"Yes, it is, exactly. That might be old Joe Bletchley, hobbling away beside the waggon; and there's the corner of the Mere farm, peeping through the trees. One might almost think

he had copied it from the old gate at the bottom of the seven acre. You just get a bit of it through the trees there, you know. Only it isn't so pretty as our house, is it, Gilbert?"

"I don't know about that. And you see there is the road leading down to the orchard behind Mr. Guildenstern's house, where I came to see you, one May morning, such a long time ago."

"Nay, it isn't such a *very* long time ago," said Eulie, looking up with a tell-tale smile of love into her husband's face. "It doesn't seem to me a bit long. If it wasn't for Teddy and Elma growing so fast and scampering all over the house, I could fancy it was only last summer we were married."

"That's because I am such a first-rate husband," said Gilbert, trying to look conceited.

"No, it isn't," said Eulie, "it's because I'm such a contented wife; satisfied, you know,

with a *very* little. But, Gilbert, we've been very happy. Haven't we been very happy, Gilbert?"

Gilbert did not say anything. Possibly he might think that the picture-gallery of the Kensington Museum was not exactly the place for the expression of all his opinions on that subject. He just sat still in front of the old waggoner, his face shining all over with ample sunlight of content, which might have come there either from the contemplation of Gainsborough's rustic picture, or the thoughts which Eulie's remarks had suggested.

By and by Opal began to pack up her work.

"There," said Eulie. "Look, she is finishing. Let us keep out of the way until she has passed, and then we will go after her."

But Opal disappeared into some recess or other, and presently came out, dressed for walking. Gilbert and Eulie followed her, un-

perceived themselves, out of the gallery, through the Museum and into the streets, where at a judicious distance they tracked her footsteps until she knocked at the door of the house in which she and Hagar Winter had a suite of rooms.

“Oh! what a grand house,” said Eulie. “I wonder if it all belongs to her. Perhaps—Oh, Gilbert, I never thought of that before—perhaps she is married and her husband lives there.”

“You’re a little goose, Eulie,” said Gilbert, who was quite sure that Lancelot would never marry anyone but Opal Darque, and almost sure that Opal Darque would never marry anyone but Lancelot.

“Let us go and knock. We needn’t ask if she is in, because we know she is.”

They knocked. Miss Opal’s maid, a smart damsel, with a due amount of London assurance and self-possession, came to the door.

"Can we speak to Miss Darque?" said Gilbert.

"There's no Miss Darque here, sir," replied the maid.

"Does not Miss Darque live at this house?"

"No, sir, nobody at all of that name. Don't know any such lady about here, sir."

"Are you quite *sure* she doesn't live here?" said Eulie, timidly, for she was rather awed by the imposing manners of the maid.

"Yes, Miss, it's a mistake. There's no Miss Darque here."

They turned away, poor Eulie looking sadly disappointed.

"Oh! Gilbert, I am quite sure it *was* Opal. I couldn't be mistaken. That girl was so ill-tempered, or I would have asked her who did live at the house."

"At any rate, Eulie, she paid you the compliment of thinking you were an unmarried lady. And I daresay she thought

you were from the country, too. She was so very patronizing."

"I don't care what she thought, if only we could find out who the lady was. Oh! Gilbert, perhaps she used to be Miss Darque, and is Mrs. Somebody now. Wouldn't it be a pity?"

"I tell you, Eulie, she isn't Mrs. Anybody. We'll go to the gallery again tomorrow, if you like, and see if she has a ring on her finger."

"Very well, And we'll try if we can't find out her name. Perhaps she has it written on some of her things."

They went again early next morning. The easel was there, the unfinished picture upon it, and drawing materials arranged ready for use. Not being a free day, there were but few people in the gallery. After they had been loitering about a little while, a man came up who appeared to be employed in the place.

“You allow your paintings to be copied, I see,” said Gilbert.

“Yes, sir. They’re left for the use of the nation, and the nation has a right to ’em. We’ve a deal of ladies and gentlemen comes here to copy.”

“Indeed! Is this a lady’s work?” said Gilbert, assuming the air of a connoisseur, much to Eulie’s amazement, who had never known him manifest so much interest in art before.

“Yes, sir, it’s a lady’s. One as used to be a student in the school. She’s reckoned to be a very good painter, sir, and does some fine things on her own account, besides copying. They call her Miss Opal, sir. You may have heard the name before, if you take an interest in painting.”

“Oh! yes,” said Gilbert, carelessly. “I know the name of Opal very well. Thank you, much obliged to you.”

And then they both strolled away.

“Oh! Gilbert, what a way you have of finding out things! I didn’t think you were half so clever. I told you, though, I was quite sure it was Opal. But, you see, she doesn’t care to use her father’s name, because he wasn’t as good as he ought to have been. But, Gilbert,” and a sudden thought seemed to strike Eulie, “papa has no business with that Penorfa property now. He would be just as bad as Captain Darque if he were to keep it any longer. At least, Lancelot has the shares, but——”

“But of course he will give them back to the person they belong to,” said Gilbert, knowing very well that there would not be much difficulty in arranging that matter by-and-by. If the property is her right, Lancelot will see that she has it.”

“Well, I hope he will. I shouldn’t like him to do anything that wasn’t right. But

what are we to do, Gilbert, now? Shall we go and call upon her? How funny it will seem to ask for Miss Opal! I wonder who she lives with, and who takes care of her, and whether they know that she has any other name, and if she has a Christian name at all, now; because if anyone loved her very much they could not call her Miss, and yet if she hadn't a proper Christian name it would be so awkward. Do let us go, Gilbert, and find out all about it."

"It would be no use, Eulie, just now, for she was evidently expected at the gallery, and she would most likely be there before we got to the house. We will come again in the afternoon, about the time that she left yesterday, and then we can watch where she goes. Besides, you know, we are not quite sure that she lives in that house at all. She might be only calling."

"So she might. I had forgotten all about

that. But I won't say anything to Lancelot until we know whether she is glad to see us or not. Oh! Gilbert, I shall be so disappointed if she isn't glad to see us."

Gilbert did not think there was much doubt about that, but he kept his thoughts to himself. In the afternoon they went again to the gallery. Opal was there, working at her picture. They loitered in the gallery until she began to pack up her brushes, and then followed her out of the place as before, and through the streets until she came to the same house at which she had stopped on the previous day.

They knocked at the door a few minutes after she had entered. Hagar Winter answered their summons this time. She looked somewhat keenly, curiously at them, for it was not often that strangers asked for Miss Opal, and something in the features of the lady reminded her of Morrishorpe, though

why she could not tell. In reply to their question, she said that Miss Opal was at home, and ushered them into a little waiting-room at the foot of the stairs. But when she asked what name she should take up, Eulie said that was of no consequence. Miss Opal would not know her by her present name.

Hagar Winter went away and presently came back, saying that Miss Opal would see the lady in her own room upstairs. Poor little Eulie's heart beat with excitement, now that the actual meeting was so near, and she would fain have had Gilbert's presence to help her over the first awkwardness of making herself known; but Gilbert for once thought that his little wife would manage better by herself.

With very timid faltering steps she followed Hagar Winter up stairs. As she entered the room from the staircase door,

Opal entered it from a curtained recess at the other end—entered it with somewhat of the grave, lofty bearing which was her wont when meeting strangers.

At the sight of Eulie, sweet, bright, winning as ever, only wearing just a touch of matronly dignity in place of her former girlish coyness, Opal started back. A look of proud, almost angry defiance, flashed into her face, before which Eulie's self-possession failed, and she stood mute, trembling, the tears in her eyes, the loving words she would have said struggling in vain for utterance. It was strangely like that scene in the garden of Morristhorpe Grange, nearly eighteen years before, when the wild, untamed little alien sprang up with mute defiance to defend her solitude from invasion the trembling child, towards whom nevertheless an undefined impulse of love and tenderness was urging her.

Still more was it like that childish scene, when Eulie, having no words to explain her presence there, went up to Opal, put her arms round her neck, and said,

“I want to give you a kiss.”

What wonder that, as Opal felt the touch of those soft warm lips, a sweet rain of tears washed away all her pride; and with the old love springing forth again, more richly for that it had so long been hidden, she cried,

“Want more—want more!”

CHAPTER XX.

“OH, you dear, *dear*, stupid old darling Opal!” said Eulie, when the two girls had been sitting in the studio for more than an hour, and Eulie had heard all the history of Opal’s wanderings during the last five years; how she had studied painting, first in London and then in Paris, and then in Italy, and won medals and certificates of merit from the different academies, and gradually worked her way up and up, until now she was able to live comfortably and even elegantly on the money she earned by giving lessons and making pictures, or copying them from the originals in the galleries; but that all the time she had been travel-

ling about and making a name for herself, she had never forgotten the old friends, and the old home, and the dear old life she used to live there; and also that she was not engaged to be married to anyone—which of course is always a subject which comes in at some part or other of any conversation between two women who have not seen or heard anything of each other for more than five years, at the commencement of which time they had neither of them achieved the honour of matrimony. “Oh, you dear, *stupid* old Opal! how could you go away and leave us all, and your little sister that you said you loved so much? And never to tell me where you were going, or what you were going to do, or whether you meant to starve to death, or drown yourself, or anything. Oh! Opal, why *did* you go away?”

“Because Miss Armitage hated me, and I thought the rest of you could do very well

without me. And, indeed, Eulie, you look as if you *had* done very well without me."

Opal said it with a touch of pain in her voice—a pain which must come when those we loved have no longer any need of our love. But Eulie did not notice the pain through the gentle raillery which overlaid it.

"Oh! yes, I am very happy. Gilbert is so good to me!—I can't tell you how good he is to me, and everything is just as nice and pleasant as it can be, and I have two such dear little children. Gilbert is so proud of them. I tell him it's very foolish of him—he spoils them so; but, you know, he can't help it. Gilbert spoils everything, he is so kind. I wanted to call the little boy Gilbert, but his papa wouldn't let me, because he said he should be old Gilbert so soon, if he had a son called after him. Stupid, wasn't it?—and he doesn't look a day older than he did that May morning, such a long time ago, when he came

to me in the orchard, and—and—well, I mean, you know, when he came back from Canada. Oh! Opal, isn't it nice to be so happy!"

"Well, yes, I daresay it is. You know you and I are happy now in a different way. And how are all the rest?" said Opal, trying to say the words carelessly. "I suppose Lancelot is as happy as you are now, for, of course, Miss Luxmore is Miss Luxmore no longer?"

"Of course Miss Luxmore is Miss Luxmore no longer," replied Eulie, with a bright smile. "I am thankful to say she is Mrs. Somebody Macturpin, of Edinburgh, lives in a very grand house, and dresses in no end of fine things. You know, Aunt Armitage was very much disappointed that she and Lancelot did not marry each other."

"And why did they not?"

"For the best of reasons—because they didn't care for each other. Oh! Opal, you *stupid*, how *could* Lancelot ever go and love

her, when all the time you know as well as could be—but never mind. He would be very angry if he knew I said anything to him about that. Poor fellow! I'm very sorry for him, for he isn't a bit happy now, though he has as much money as he wants, and gets along famously in his profession. You know, he has been able to come to London now, and go along just the same as if things had never turned out badly. And oh! that reminds me, Opal, did you ever hear about that Paris concern, and the Penorfa mines? Such a queer story—oh! such a *queer* story!"

"Never mind the Paris concern," said Opal, quietly. "I know all about it; but you can tell me another time. I want to hear about your own concerns. How is Mr. Guildenstern?—papa, I used to call him once, but I shall never call him papa again now."

"Oh! yes, you will, though. You will call him papa ten times more than ever you did

before. I'm sure you will. We're all going to belong to each other again, just as we used to do. Papa isn't a bit like what he once was. Oh! Opal, they've none of them been a bit like what they were before you went away. Will you never—*never* come back to Morrithorpe again, Opal—my sister, that used to be?"

"Not until Miss Armitage asks me," said Opal, the proud look of defiance coming once more into her face.

"Oh! then you will have to wait a very long time, because there is no Miss Armitage now. Only last year, at this time, Amos Durben came back—and that just reminds me, who is that queer-looking woman who came to the door? She's a very little bit like the woman that used to take care of you at Morrithorpe Grange—at least, as much as I remember of her, for Bessy Dobbinson never would let me go into the house any more than she could help. She

wears those funny white caps tied under her chin, and looks so very stiff, and grave, and stern. Oh! what a grave woman that Hagar Winter was, to be sure! But, after all, you know, Opal, it was a very good thing that she did get drowned, because, if she hadn't, you would never have come to live with us, and Lancelot would never—at least, I mean we should never any of us have loved you as we do now, even though you *did* go away from us, right out into the great world, without anyone to take care of you, and be good to you."

Then Opal had to go through the whole story, stranger even than that which Amos Durben had come so far to tell. That Hagar Winter had never been drowned, but had only left her bundle by the water side and gone away to London, where she had been living ever since. And that every year she had come down to Morrishorpe at the Card-

ington September fair, and so had happened to be there when Amos Durben paid his visit to the place, and was ready to take care of her foster-child again, when Miss Armitage's unkind words had thrust her forth from under Mr. Guildenstern's roof. And that they had lived together ever since, and should do until death parted them.

"For Mother Hagar has done more for me than I can ever repay, Eulie. She has spent her whole life to take care of mine."

"I am sure it was very good of her," said Eulie, nestling both her little ungloved hands closer into Opal's; "only it would have been more comfortable for you if she had never let you think that she was drowned. It must be so miserable to think of anyone we love going drifting down amongst slime and mud and river-weed into the ocean, without being properly buried, or anything

of that sort. If she had told you she was all right and earning a living in London, it would have been ever so much nicer, and you could have staid with us all the same. But how wonderful to think of her handing up again in that way, when you had no one else to help you. It's just for all the world like what one reads about in story books, only we haven't come to the end yet, when everybody gets married and lives happily ever afterwards. Oh! Opal, couldn't you write a story about your life? It would be ten times better than all the stories we used to tell in that dear old nursery. Weren't they pleasant days, Opal, when we were all little children together?"

No answer to that question, only the long, wistful, yearning look into a past which could never come again; a look whose meaning Eulie, in the fulness of her happy love, could never fathom.

“But,” said Opal, for she dare not linger over the memory of that early sunshine, “you were telling me about Miss Armitage.”

“Oh ! yes—Aunt Armitage ; only Hagar Winter came up and put it all out of my head. Well, Amos Durben came last year about this time, on business connected with the firm, as he said, but I believe he only wanted to know about you. However, we could not tell him anything, and so he asked Aunt Armitage if she would marry him.”

“What a peculiar sequence ! And did she really ?”

“Oh ! yes. She never made any fuss about it ; and they had a very grand wedding six weeks after the proposal. Mr. Durben managed everything, and took her away in first-rate style, and she sends us word that she likes it very much ; because, you know, Aunt Armitage was always fond of having plenty

of money, only until she married Mr. Durben she never could have it. Lancelot was so glad when she went away. I do believe he just hated her ever after that time when you went with us to Cardington fair. You know she always managed somehow to get things as she wanted to have them, whether other people liked it or not; and he could not help blaming her for—but never mind, she is all right now, and so are we, and there is an end of it.”

Opal could not quite see the all rightness, except so far as Eulie was concerned. However, she held her peace, and the happy little woman went chatting on, quite at ease and at home now; one bright sweet thought shining through her hazel eyes and giving them a gladness which Opal, who did not know how much of it was for her, set down to the account of Gilbert Lester’s love.

“So now you see, Opal, if you wait for Aunt

Armitage to ask you to come to Morrishorpe, you will have to wait a very, very long time. But won't it do if someone else asks you? If I asked you, Opal, would you come?"

"No Eulie," said Opal sadly, "I should never come for asking of yours."

"Would you if Lancelot asked you?"

Opal turned her face quickly away, but not until Eulie had seen the red rose blooming upon it.

Soon after that, Mrs. Lester tripped down stairs again, ten times more lightly and brightly than she had gone up an hour before. And as she took her husband's arm and went out again into the busy London streets, she said,

"It's all right, Gilbert—I know it's all right."

CHAPTER XXI.

NEXT day Lancelot Guildenstern was stretching himself drearily after dinner, in his softly cushioned easy-chair. He was generally dreary and listless now at home, unless the excitement of some law case took him out of himself. As he finished his second glass of port, Eulie, who had been quivering with suppressed eagerness and impatience during the whole of dinner-time, jumped up and said,

“Lancelot, I want you to take a cab and go for a walk with me.”

“Take a cab and go for a walk! What next, I wonder? Why, Gilbert always did say you were a little goose, and I’ve wasted

more talent than most of the barristers in England possess, in trying to convince him of his mistake ; but I begin to believe he was more than half right, after all. And pray, my dear, inoffensive little sister, to what part of this great city should you like us to go for a walk in the cab."

Eulie pretended to be indignant.

"It's very fine, Lance, to laugh at me, but I'm right after all. We *are* to take a cab first ; and then, when the cab has taken us far enough, we are to get out and walk somewhere else."

"I beg your pardon ; that makes all the difference. Gilbert, I tell you for the five thousandth time that this wedded partner of yours is *not* a goose. And pray, Mrs. Eulie, will you please to tell me where you are going to be kind enough to take me?"

"To the studio of an artist near the Kensington Museum, Lancelot. I want you to

see a picture which you will very much enjoy."

"Bravo !" and the sarcastic smile which was sadly too much at home on Lancelot's face now, crept over it again. "Our little Morristhorpe farmer's wife is absolutely becoming a connoisseur in the fine arts ; takes her innocent brother about to see the artistic beauties of the metropolis, and that sort of thing. Subject, Mrs. Eulie. Come, don't be afraid to tell us all about it. Something in the bucolic line most likely ; couple of dead ducks lying on their backs, or a brood of newly hatched fluffy yellow chickens in a wicker basket ; or, no, I have it now, a farm-house interior after Van Cuyp, Gilbert in breeches and leather jerkin, wife in square toes, snow-white cap and bib, nursing red-faced baby in the chimney corner, two or three more tumbling about on the floor, cabbages filling up the foreground. I have it in my mind's eye at this very mo-

ment; nevertheless let us call a cab and go at once. I'm all anxiety to see your ideal of Dutch domesticity."

"You may tease me as much as you like," said Eulie, bravely. "I don't care a bit. I won't tell you whether it's a Dutch baby or an English barrister, but it's a very beautiful picture."

"Then I'm sure it isn't a barrister, Eulie. But still, the cab shall be sent for as soon as you like. I want something to put on the time. It always does seem to want putting on now."

And Lancelot stretched himself again. People who invited young Mr. Guildenstern to their entertainments, said there never was a man who took so little pains to make himself agreeable. Either he seemed to think the whole concern a bore, or else he went into the brilliantly-sarcastic line, and turned everybody and everything into ridicule. Indeed, if it had

not been for his unappropriated condition and eligible prospects, the social world would long ago have left him to his own devices.

Eulie went to put on her bonnet. Collins, the boy in buttons, was sent for the cab.

"To the Kensington Museum," said Eulie, when they were ready to start.

"Oh! come, Mrs. Eulie, that is rather too much of a joke," said Lancelot. "I thought it was to be a private studio. I can go to Kensington to see Dutch domesticity any day, without an introduction from a connoisseur. The idea of making all this fuss, when a sixpence would do as well."

"A sixpence would *not* do as well, Lancelot, and if you don't behave like good boy, you shall not go at all."

"Oh! please"—and Lancelot clasped his hands in a pretended agony of penitence—"I shall go mourning all my days if you don't take me to see Gilbert and the babies. Do

please let me be off before I make any more mistakes, to Kensington or anywhere, so long as Dutch domesticity may be admired and wondered at."

So off they went. At the door of the Museum Eulie got out.

"You are not to come with me, Lancelot. I won't be one minute. Just wait here for me, please."

Away Eulie ran into the gallery to see if Opal was there. She was, and so deeply absorbed in her work, too, that she never saw Eulie's bright little face peeping in at the door. That was all Gilbert Lester's wife wanted to know. Down she came again, the cab was dismissed, and taking her brother's arm, they walked on for about a quarter of a mile to the rather grand house in which Opal and Hagar Winter lived.

The damsel in assurance and crinoline attended their summons, but Eulie's self-pos-

session was equal to the situation this time.

“Will you show us into the studio?” she said, with an assumption of dignity which was positively amusing. “I know your mistress is not at home, but I have called to look at a picture, and I will wait until she comes. Here is my card.”

“Goodness! Eulie,” said Lancelot, wondering how the little bit of acting was to end—“how grand you have come out, all of a sudden, as they say! No one would think, to listen to you, that you were a young person from the country. Why, I declare I shall have to come and beg to be taken under the shadow of your protection by-and-by, you queen it so grandly.”

“You will be very much obliged to me by-and-by,” said Eulie, demurely.

“When Dutch domesticity dawns upon my astonished vision, I suppose you mean.”

“Yes, of course,” and Eulie preceded her

brother into the little curtained recess where Opal kept her pictures and unfinished studies. "Now, didn't I tell you I had a treat in store for you? Did you ever see such beautiful pictures as these?—and to be done by a lady, too!"

Lancelot looked carelessly round. It was not in his way now to give much admiration to anything.

"Pretty little den. Can't think how it is women always contrive to make things look nice about them. You can always tell when you go into a room, if a woman has anything to do with it."

"I should rather think you can. I don't know what a woman is good for, if she can't make things look nice. But just look here, now," and Eulie led him up to an unfinished landscape upon the easel. "Isn't this very like Morristhorpe?"

Lancelot laughed, as bitter people do laugh

at the sweet content of those with whom life has dealt lovingly and gently.

“Very like Morristhorpe! Exceedingly so! In fact, every landscape you meet with appears to be remarkably like Morristhorpe. You found one at the Kensington Museum only the day before yesterday, and another in the National Gallery last week, and a third in the library of the fellow we dined with on Tuesday, and now here is a fourth which looks just for all the world as if it had been taken from a sketch on the spot. General scrimmage of green trees, one or two old houses, a few sheep on the other side of a hedge, colony of ducks in a pond, judicious admixture of blue smoke, couple of lovers leaning over a stile! Oh! yes, it is *wonderfully* like Morristhorpe, Eulie—in fact, the very place over again!”

“Well, I don’t care; you may make fun of me if you like. But if you talk like that,

I won't let you stay any longer. You shall go away directly."

"All right. I'm quite ready any time."

"No, you're not quite ready any time. You won't be ready until you have had a long look at this picture."

And Eulie led her brother into a corner, where hung the very sketch of Morrishorpe Grange into which Opal had been putting the shadows that morning, six years ago, when Lancelot came into the painting-room.

"There! If all landscapes are like Morrishorpe, I suppose all old houses are not exactly like Morrishorpe Grange!"

Lancelot bit his lips, and a harsh expression clouded his face. Not for Eulie, not for anyone else the thoughts neither dead nor forgotten, but stinging every hour of a disappointed life, which belonged to that picture. He looked keenly at it for a few moments, and then turned impatiently away.

"All shadow. Nothing but shadow."

"It isn't all shadow. It's you, Lancelot, that are all shadow this afternoon. You're just nothing but a great dab of neutral tint. Oh! Lancelot, Lancelot, *can't* you understand?"

"I can understand," said Lancelot bitterly, "that you have brought me a long way, and given me a great deal of inconvenience, to show me what I would rather not have seen. It was scarcely like you, Eulie. If the performance is over, I will thank you to escort me home again, now."

Eulie laughed, but only to keep back the tears which were just ready to come.

"Oh! you *are* a wonderful genius to be a barrister. Can't you guess who painted that picture?"

"I can. And I suppose the person who bought it, lives here. Mrs. Lester, I think I told you I was ready to go, at any time."

Eulie wanted to reach up to his shoulder

to give him a good shake, but it was too far, and the tears were now chasing the smiles over her face as she tried to seem as if nothing was the matter.

“No, you’re not ready to go, Lancelot; and nobody bought the picture, because it belongs to our dear Opal, and so does everything else in this room; and this is her easel, Lancelot, and that is the place where she stood this very morning. And if you’ll only wait just a little bit longer——”

But Eulie’s tears had got quite the better of her smiles now, and she was sobbing in right earnest as she hid her face on her brother’s arm.

“Oh! Lancelot, I’m so happy. I can’t tell you all about it, but somebody else will.”

For the door was opened just then. A tall, graceful, noble-looking woman came into the room. One bright glance of recognition to Eulie, then one of questioning towards the

stranger who stood by her picture of Morris-thorpe Grange ; questioning changing quickly into consciousness, as the well-remembered face turned itself upon her, and told her in its look of glad surprise that all the happy past was indeed remembered still.

“Oh! Opal, it is my brother Lancelot. Be kind to him.”

And Eulie, dear little peacemaker, true child of God, left them alone to the content which only comes after long suffering and long waiting, such as theirs had been.

CHAPTER XXII.

“SO you said you would never call Mr. Guildenstern ‘papa’ any more, Mrs. Lancelot? I always thought ‘never’ was a very long word, a great deal more than three months long.”

“You little goose!” said Opal, snatching up Teddy, who was playing on the floor, and covering him with kisses, to hide the happy smile which flooded all her face. And the little lad, who loved nothing better than a good romp with his Aunty Opal, caught hold of her hair and brought it down in glorious confusion over them both, forming thereby a most effectual screen for Aunty’s discomfiture.

“Yes, it’s all very fine for you to kiss my boy, when you’ve just been insulting his mamma by calling her a goose. Everyone seems at liberty to call me a goose; but I don’t think I’m anything of the sort. At any rate, I’m quite as sensible as some people who think themselves so very wise, and paint pictures for the Academy, and get asked out to soirées, and have grand people call to see them, and all that sort of thing. And whatever else I do, I don’t say I shall never do some particular thing, and then, three months after, go and do it, just as if nothing was the matter.”

“Eulie, you chatterer, you audacious little mocking-bird!”

“Oh! I’m a mocking-bird now, am I? A pretty thing for a farmer’s wife and the mother of a family to be called a mocking-bird! I wonder what department of natural history I shall be put into next. Just as

if it was not of the slightest consequence what people said about me. No, no, you shan't go and kiss Teddy again; I won't have him made a convenience in that way, and you need not let him pull your hair all down over your face either, because I know what it means well enough. Now just say that *you* were the goose, and then kiss Teddy as much as you like. Don't you think you *were* a little bit of a goose, Opal?—just a very little bit, now. As much as such a celebrated artist can be, you know."

"I'll say I was anything you like, Eulie, only don't go and tease me about it before Lancelot."

"Bless its dear little heart! It can't bear to be teased before its husband. Why, Opal, I don't care a bit about being teased before Gilbert. That makes it all the better fun. And Lancelot *is* such a tease, too! But you're afraid of him. Now, confess it, you are just a

little bit afraid of him. There, you're kissing Teddy again, and that tells the whole story. I know as well as can be you *are* afraid."

"Oh! Eulie, Eulie, what a plague you have turned out! Whoever would have thought there was so much mischief in you?"

"No one. I did not even know it myself, until I had a dear, good, grand sister like you to tease. And I can't help teasing you, because you're ever so fond of Lancelot, and you're ashamed of letting anyone see it. Just as if I couldn't find it out all the time, though people *do* call me a goose. But, Opal, we really are very happy, are we not? Don't you think we are both of us a great deal happier than we deserve to be?"

"I don't know about your part of it, Eulie, but I'm sure I am. I must go to Mother Hagar now, though. I have left her for a long time."

"Poor Mother Hagar! I wish we could make her happy too, but we can't."

“Not yet, Eulie, but she will be some day. I am sure she will.”

This little dialogue took place in the library of the pretty villa where Eulie was spending the first anniversary of their wedding-day with Mr. and Mrs. Lancelot Guildenstern.

Lancelot was succeeding well in his profession. Unlike many beginners, he had not to wait for tardy briefs, or pretend to be so wonderfully busy in his chambers, when in reality he was doing nothing at all. He was a better man now, too, than he could have been if Miss Armitage's brilliant anticipations for him had not ended in disappointment. Those five years in the wilderness had done much for him. They had pruned away much useless material from his character. They had taught him to be more patient, less exacting, tolerant to the failings of others, and more alive, perhaps, to his own than he used to be in those long-ago

days, when Opal's fitfulness first charmed, and then vexed him so. And now, the frost and bitterness of the young year having done their work upon him, the sweet summer sunshine had come to ripen the fruit which they had only checked, not spoiled.

Hagar Winter stayed with Opal after her marriage, and was cared for by her and Lancelot with a love which would fain have made the poor woman's last days her best days. But Hagar Winter never looked up again after her foster-child had passed into the protection of another. She felt that no one needed her now—that her work was done. Nor could all their tenderness win her out of the desolate reserve into which she retired when she saw that Opal's happiness was complete without her.

For a few months she tried to comfort herself in the work which had been her rest for so many years. She was too feeble to do any more nursing for the hospital patients, but she

could still toil on as heretofore at her lace-making, and then go out to dispose of what she had made, that she might not feel herself burdensome to those who were giving her a home. But that did not last long. Slowly, but surely, she wasted away, the strong, restless, unsatisfied soul wearing out the body that could no longer obey its stern commands.

She was very glad when, at last, they told her she would die. It was what she had wanted, she said, for a long time. The only thing which vexed her proud, yet faithful spirit in the prospect of death, was, that before it came, she must needs be a burden to the child whom she had promised herself to sustain. It seemed like a betraying of her trust to take even the shelter of a home, or the quiet of a grave from one whom she had solemnly accepted as her own charge until death parted them. So, to the very last, whilst the poor, weak, trembling fingers could fulfil their work,

she insisted on doing everything for herself. She would accept no help, no ministry of watchful love or gratitude that Opal could give her.

“Only let me alone.” That was what she would say, with such a pitiful, restless look in her hollow eyes. “Only let me alone, now that you are happy, until I get leave to die. It’s all I want now, is leave to die.”

“Then, if I can’t help you in any other way, Mother Hagar, will you let me read to you?”

And Opal would fetch the little Bible, very worn and faded now, out of which Hagar Winter had taught her, twenty years ago, in the old kitchen at Morristhorpe Grange. Opal always read to her out of that Bible, because she knew Hagar liked to see it, and be reminded of the faithfulness with which she had kept her promise. For the poor woman clung still with her whole soul to the memory of duty done; and she would say, over and over

again, when nothing brought her any peace—

“I’ve done my duty to you, child. No one ever had it to say against me that I didn’t do my duty. Only tell me that I’ve done what’s right by you, and I shall go content !”

“You have, Mother Hagar, you have.”

But the content did not come for all Opal’s assurances of the duty done. No gleam of comfort ever shone through those restless eyes, not one smile of brightness ever came to light up the poor sad face upon which the shadow of death was slowly settling down.

So the time wore on, until the end came. One fine night, not many days after Eulie had gone home with little Teddy to the Mere farm, Opal went up to Mother Hagar to watch by her, as she often did whilst the poor woman lay moaning to herself, unconscious that anyone was near. She began to read aloud from the Bible, thinking that perhaps the words might be a comfort, though Hagar never asked

for them, or seemed to listen to them. But when she came to the Lord's Prayer, a cold, damp, dying hand was thrust out towards her.

"You needn't go on, child. You know I never say that. I never told a lie."

"Oh! Mother Hagar," pleaded Opal. "If you would but forgive as you hope to be forgiven."

"As I hope to be forgiven, child," and Hagar's fingers closed with a death-damp grip on those of Opal, so warm with life. "As I hope to be forgiven. I've lived a lonely, desolate life, Opal, and what puts sweetness into most women's hearts has put nothing but blighting and mildew into mine. Yet I've been still over it, and I've tried to do my duty, and I've gone shivering out to my work in the cold and the dark, whilst others who had no more right to it than me—ay, whilst Mark and his wife warmed themselves in the merry sunshine. And if I need to be forgiven for doing my duty, and

being starved and lonely, God pity me, for I can't pity myself."

"He is very pitiful, Mother Hagar, and of tender mercy."

"Is he, child? Ay, so they say; but he never showed much of it to me. Opal, there was a poor little broken-winged bird came to my doorstep at Morristhorpe Grange, long years ago, and it couldn't so much as look at me nor flutter into my hand, but I took it up, and I warmed it, and I fed it, and I carried it out into the sunshine and the sweetness; and when it didn't want me any more, I gave it back again to its freedom. I was only a woman, Opal, a sinful woman, as they say, yet I had pity on the little bird; but God never pitied me when I was broken-winged and weary, and he never took me to himself and comforted me; and I've gone on all my life, in the cold, and in the dark. Ah! he *would* have been very pitiful and of tender mercy if he had only

dealt with me as I dealt with the little bird long years ago, as I once dealt with you, Opal, when there was no one else to care for you."

The tears were blinding Opal's eyes, and she could find no words wherewith to comfort the wandering, darkened spirit. At last, as people do when all earthly hope is gone, she spoke of heaven; of the eternal day upon which no shadow of evening rests, of the blessed chamber of peace out of whose guarded shelter no prodigal can wander forth any more. But no light came into Hagar Winter's face for thought of that peace.

"I don't want it, child. It's too late. I couldn't do with heaven, now. I daresay it sounds pleasant to you to hear about the harps, and the music, and the singing, and the everlasting daylight; but I don't want anything more from God when he's done with me here, than to let me creep quietly away somewhere where there's darkness and stillness and rest.

It's been darkness and misery here, Opal, and if it's only darkness and rest there, I shall be well content."

And the poor wasted face was turned away. Hagar Winter refused to be comforted.

By and by she began to murmur, as though her mind were wandering.

"I've lost the way home. I thought I should go content. Oh, dear!"

And then, very faintly and wearily,

"I've done a hard day's work."

After that, there was a great silence in the room, such a silence as only comes with night and the shadow of death. Without, the distant noise and rush of city life were laid to rest; its clamour of buying and selling, of coming and going, of mirth, misery, care and pain, all stilled for awhile by merciful sleep and forgetfulness. In that pause between the dark and the daylight, between life and death,

no sound was heard but the rustling of leaves as the June wind swept through the aspen branches outside, and the faint fluttering of a breath that would soon be still for ever.

Lancelot came in, and side by side he and his wife watched Hagar Winter there, the same thought in each of their hearts, the same unspoken prayer that some light from heaven might shine down into the sad sick soul whose gloom no words of theirs could brighten any more.

It came. Tremblingly those dying fingers sought each other. Then Hagar Winter's lips moved again very slowly, and with long pauses she whispered the prayer which for a lifetime had been left unspoken.

"Forgive us—our sins."

Opal bent over her. Oh if she would but say the rest! If, so late and so weary, the wanderer was returning home at last!

She was. He whose ways are not as our

ways, who, when clasp of human hand and speech of human voice, and loving tender look of human eye, are alike powerless for help or comfort in the soul's last need, can touch with His own strong, everlasting life the flickering, failing life that stretches feebly forth to Him, was leading His child to rest.

"For we also, forgive everyone."

A long fluttering breath, one smile which rayed over the poor worn features like the parting glow of sunlight on some blasted, mouldering ruin, and then Hagar Winter died.

Nay, truly, then she began to live. For in that prayer the stricken, yet repentant soul touched heaven's golden gates, and the good Christ opened them, even unto her.

They closed her eyes. Night wore away; red streaks of dawn began to quiver upon the grey morning twilight. Far off the lark's sweet carol up-rose to heaven. Lancelot drew

his wife closer to him, and as, weeping, she covered the wasted face upon which no pain could write its story any more, he only said, with a smile, these words,——

“The Pilgrim they laid in an upper chamber, whose windows were toward the sun-rising. The name of the chamber was *Peace*.”

THE END.

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